

Flinging Myself into the Broader World

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In the undergraduate class *Girls and Print Culture*, the author began a project that would go on to be published in *Young Scholars in Writing*. This singular experience drew her into a national academic community, which encouraged her to participate in her local academic community. This led directly to introductions into many post-academic communities, enriching her life in ways that ten years later she still finds meaningful and enjoyable.

It's first thing on a workday morning and as I turn on the computer and open my email, the phone rings. A fellow paralegal working for co-counsel wants to know if we received the latest production from our opponents. Yes, we received it. Did I see any emails from the CEO produced? I get on our system and quickly search the documents. No, I don't see any emails from the CEO. Well, we better let our supervising attorneys know so they can coordinate a response to this gap. And with a whoosh my day is off to the races, with emails, phone calls, conferences, and meetings. The legal community doesn't move without some sort of clearance, coordination, or connection with at least one relevant party.

In the winter semester of 2002, however, my sense of belonging to a community—any community—was all but lost. I was twenty-seven and I'd just left my husband. While one of our most serious issues of contention was the fact that we owned our own business and I no longer wanted to be self-employed, I had taken over our janitorial route service—a solitary career. I was also taking two classes a semester at the University of Missouri, Kansas City (UMKC) to finish my bachelor's degree in English. I loved being in school, but all I did was show up to class and turn in assignments. I might participate in class, but I didn't connect with classmates outside of class, and I didn't participate in any extracurricular clubs or activities.

By the end of 2003, I had blossomed from a barely engaged student to a full-fledged member of the academic community. Having an essay published in *Young Scholars in Writing* (YSW) played a key role in this transition. My essay, "Girls in Business Meetings: Beta Phi Theta Rho Secretaries Take Charge, 1946–1950," started as a project for a class, *Girls and Print Culture*, taught by Dr. Jane Greer, who was unaffiliated with YSW at the time. The essay went on—in 2003—to become the lead article in the premier issue of YSW. By the middle of 2003, I believed I was on my way to a brilliant academic career. My life, however, did not take the course that I expected it to take, and I did not go into academia. Instead of devaluing my publication experience, however, not staying in academia made that experience even more precious. Writing a publishable essay provided me with an irreplaceable undergraduate research experience at the time, and since then has presented me with introductions to a host of communities in my post-academic life.

The Experience

In winter 2002, I took Dr. Greer's *Girls and Print Culture* class. The class studied the ways girls are portrayed in stories, books, and magazines; the ways girls are addressed by those same media; and the ways girls create images of themselves in print media. For one class meeting, Dr. Greer arranged an invaluable class field trip to the State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center in Kansas City. Going to the historical society, attending a presentation given by the curator, and being introduced to some of the manuscripts in such a warm and open setting made the whole

research experience so much less scary. This is especially true since I ended up using a primary source from the historical society's collection for the class project.

Dr. Greer required every student in the class to write a research paper using a primary source written by a girl or girls. Students used everything from magazines that published girls' writings, diaries kept by girls, student newspapers, the writings of girls they knew from their own lives, or even their own writings from childhood. I didn't think I'd like using my own work even if I could find texts I'd written as a girl; and the only girl relative I had was a three-month-old niece whose writing repertoire was obviously lacking. So I wanted to write about a girl's diary, thinking, of course, that a diary would be some sort of first-person narrative with a story arc. Due to my own procrastinating tendencies, I wasn't having any success finding a diary that one of the other students hadn't already snatched up.

The curator of the historical society had brought the minute book of the Beta Phi Theta Rho Girls' Club to Dr. Greer's attention. She was thrilled by this find and encouraged me to take on the project. I was not interested. But finally the point came when I had to choose some primary source, and at least no one else would be looking at the minute book. I wasted most of the semester of that class. First I wasted time not choosing a source. Then I wasted time with my lack of enthusiasm for my project. The semester went on, though, and I needed to write some sort of paper, so I began to actually look at the two hundred pages of microfilm.

It wasn't easy. I had secondary sources like Anne Ruggles Gere's *Intimate Practices*, which focuses on women's clubs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and a whole host of other sources that dealt with adolescence, girls in adolescence, girls' clubs, girls' literacies. I did not have anything on girls keeping their own minutes, or girls in business meetings. I just didn't know what I could say about girls who said so little about themselves. What did a typical entry like "We allowed 1.53 for flowers for our sponsor" (24 June 1946) tell me? There is no indication of the reason flowers were bought, and none of who the sponsor might be.

In the first two entries of the minute book, six or seven girls are mentioned as being in attendance (28 January 1946 and 11 February 1946). These girls are never mentioned again anywhere in the book. In the paper I wrote for the class, I'm pretty sure I had all these girls running off to marry their war-hero sweethearts. World War II had just ended, and I thought nothing of creating stories for these girls. It was easier to make up stories for them than to attempt to draw conclusions with actual foundation.

Yet, at the same time, I was drawn to the small ways in which I could bring these girls' voices into the larger academic conversation. I had taken Shakespeare the previous year, which influentially developed my interest in the academic conversation. One Shakespearean scholar would publish a book putting forth one theory and then another scholar would publish a book, writing, "So-and-so says such-and-such; however, obviously this, that, and the other are being overlooked. I am right for this, this, and this reason." There was so obviously a conversational aspect to the scholarship, and sometimes the conversation barely kept a civil tone.

Having this experience my second semester at UMKC prepared me to see the ways in which all academic scholarship is on some level a community experience. With the minute book, I was working with a rather unusual primary source. What might I be able to add to the conversation about girls, about adolescent literacy, and perhaps about feminism?

Just as I was really getting interested in the work, the semester was at an end. I had to turn in a paper—and it was a poorly written paper. And that was that. It's not an uncommon conclusion to such a project, but it was disappointing. That may very well have been as far as it ever went, but Jane Greer's enthusiasm for the project inspired me. I think there is little that is more academically inspiring than having a professor be not just interested but truly enthusiastic about one's project.

At the end of the Girls and Print Culture class, Dr. Greer had made a comment about wanting

to see my work published. Looking back, I really don't remember if she made a general comment to the class about our collective work, or if it was a vague comment about wanting to see something published on my particular topic. By the time the end of the calendar year had come around, though, what I remembered hearing was that she specifically wanted to see my paper published. I had the elective hours available and thought that perhaps the minute book was worth another go. I sent Dr. Greer an email expressing interest in picking up the work again as an independent study project with an eye toward publishing the end result. To my everlasting good fortune, Drs. Candace Spigelman and Laurie Grobman from Pennsylvania State University, Berks, had just sent out their first call for submissions for *YSW*.

So I dived back in. I was definitely more engaged in the project this time around. I had chosen to come back to the topic; it was no longer some esoteric chore that some eccentric professor had foisted upon me. Of course, I also had a clear and definite goal. I could use my senior thesis, which I had written the previous semester, as my writing sample for graduate school applications. But with the minute book, there was a special academic spark: I was writing about something no one else had written about. I would be the one to carve out the space for these girls' voices. I had something to bring to the larger academic conversation surrounding feminism and girls' studies.

Nonetheless, it was not any easier to write about these girls the second time around. I still wanted to draw conclusions for which I had no foundation. For example, in the 10 March 1947 entry, Connie Churchwell writes, "Committee was appointed to ask the Fox about sponsering [*sic*] a show. Discussion was held about a Tom Brenman show." In my inexperience, I was completely comfortable assuming that this was a reference to some local TV show on the local Fox station. Never mind that the Fox network didn't exist until 1986, or that in Joplin, Missouri, in the 1940s it is more than likely that many, perhaps even most, of these girls didn't have a TV. What was "the Fox?" Was it a local radio station? Or perhaps a local theater? The girls knew what it was, but did not spell it out for future readers. I had to step outside my own head.

I had the history of a hundred meetings in this minute book, and yet each meeting was described in perhaps two or three sentences—and not whole paragraphs, but two or three individual comments. Many of the entries were like the one just quoted. We know that the girls discussed sponsoring some sort of a show, they even reference a specific show, but the idea receives no further acknowledgment. Did they sponsor a show or not? And if not, why not? They leave no clues. What could I say about girls who said so little about themselves or their activities? I had to focus on what the girls actually wrote and learn to recognize my assumptions so that I didn't fabricate facts.

By mid-semester, I realized that in addition to what I might glean from the girls, I really needed to contextualize them and their club. I would have to go beyond my primary document to scholarly research to find out about Theta Rho Girls' Clubs. Even in 2003, Google was a force to be reckoned with. But I was finding very limited information through search engines. I discovered the website for the founding chapter of the Theta Rho, and I located websites of other chapters, but I was not finding anything on the Beta Phi chapter of Joplin, Missouri.

I didn't have time to dither. As much as I didn't really like contacting people cold, I took a deep breath and emailed a gentleman listed as the contact for one of the Missouri Theta Rho chapters. He sent me the email address of Carlene Rhoades, a Rebekah sister (an adult woman involved with the Theta Rho clubs), from Trenton, Missouri, actively involved with the Theta Rho clubs on a local and state level. So I took another deep breath and emailed Mrs. Rhoades. The information Carlene provided allowed me to create a backdrop for the records these girls kept. Carlene and I then kept in touch for nearly five years after my paper was published.

The real draw of the project for me was the opportunity to add to the larger discussion of club records, girls' studies, and feminism. I knew that having published an essay would look great on

my curriculum vitae, but what I really wanted from the experience was to be a part of that larger academic community and to have an audience. Knowing that the goal was to fling this essay into the broader world and put it into scholastically accessible print was like going from swimming in a little pond to jumping into the ocean.

I just had to figure out what sorts of conclusions I could draw about the entries of these terse girls. So I immersed myself in the microfilm, making notes and comparing entries. Finally, as I began to notice that certain girls seemed to appear and disappear, I began methodically keeping score of the secretaries' entries: I counted the number of times each girl was mentioned; I counted the number of times each secretary kept the minutes; I charted the ways in which the secretaries referred to themselves and to their fellow club members as well as to outsiders; and I explored what these data sets might tell me. Then I looked at the works of other scholars to see the ways in which their conclusions might inform my own.

In the end, I could make observations like, "[Anne Ruggles] Gere writes of the tendency for secretaries to edit minute-keeping styles. According to Gere, a secretary from the Friday Club in Jackson, Michigan, acknowledged that she had a choice about the way she recorded minutes, whether they were to be 'poetic fancies . . . [in] quaint humorous style . . . [or] deep wisdom and philosophy' (39). While Jeanne rarely seems to have pondered such possibilities, she did choose the way she wrote. In the minutes she kept, Jeanne shows an unparalleled willingness both to follow and to ignore the prescribed formula of the book" (Stuart 12).

Finally the end of the semester came, and with much trepidation I sent a copy of my finished essay to *YSW*. The response I received was unexpectedly positive. Drs. Spigelman and Grobman were impressed with my paper. With a few minor changes, they thought it was worthy of being the lead essay in *YSW*'s premier issue. And so, with those few changes made, it was.

Maintaining My Literate Community Ties . . .

Almost immediately I began to receive invitations into a variety of communities. I have been asked, along with other students, to give brief introductory presentations to successive Girls and Print Culture classes. I was asked to join a Girls' Studies Book Club, in which we read not only popular novels like *The Hunger Games* and scholarship like *Packaging Girlhood* but also the work of the group members, including two English professors and a master's student. The members of my book club even critiqued this essay for me. A couple of weeks ago, because of the essay I wrote for *YSW*, a senior at UMKC asked to interview me for her senior thesis project on undergraduate research and feminism. The introduction *YSW* gave me into these conversations has been priceless, but there are two opportunities that really stand out.

First, I have had multiple occasions to peer review essays for *YSW*. I love peer reviewing. There is so much rich, fertile scholarship being done at the undergraduate level. Just being exposed to such work is an honor. I, however, am also allowed the privilege of providing critical feedback to enable these students to have their own rewarding experience through publishing an essay in *YSW*. When I sit down to critique an essay, I look for the ways in which the author has taken the primary source and drawn it into a scholarly conversation. I want to see papers that actively engage with secondary scholarship. I am most excited by works that bring obscure sources into the picture. I want the author to think of the context of the essay and the ways in which the audience can be pulled into the conversation through the essay. It's been so rewarding to be able to stay connected to a journal that is doing such important work.

Second, for the year that I was still in school after *YSW*'s acceptance of my essay, I was introduced to UMKC's Undergraduate English Council (UEC), a student organization that spreads literacy awareness across campus. Being published in *YSW* connected me to the academic community in ways that I had never before been connected to any community, and I saw joining the UEC as

a way to deepen and enrich that connection as well as bring it to the local level. Without my YSW experience, I probably would not have joined the UEC, which was such a successful effort that it led directly to me being a more active member of my local community. I stay active politically by attending town hall meetings and open city council meetings, and, of course, by voting. I also volunteer for local charitable organizations, and I am involved in local social groups. One of the first things I did when I started school at Johnson County Community College to earn a paralegal certificate was to join the Kansas City Paralegal Association. Had I not joined the UEC, it is likely that I would have participated in very few of these activities. YSW put me in touch with people across the country, inviting me into a national and sometimes international conversation. Being introduced to the UEC brought me into the local community, showing me the rewards of being active at the local level and increasing my comfort level (I had never previously been much of a joiner) with joining local organizations.

... While Leaving Academia

When I graduated from UMKC, my plan was to take a couple of years off and then go to graduate school. I was done with school for a while and I wanted some time to work on a story I had in my head. So I started writing my novel. The more I wrote, the more I wanted to write. I had experienced how hard I'd had to work on my essay to get it published; I could see how much time and effort graduate school was going to take; and I was no longer sure that was what I wanted to devote my life to. Besides, I'd been published once. How hard would it be to be published again?

Of course, it turned out to be a little harder than expected. I'd never before even tried to write a novel. Eight years after graduation, I still haven't completed a single novel, let alone published one. I'm close, but it hasn't happened yet. Still, my experiences with YSW inspire me to persevere and are priceless in the process of all the research I do.

For the first six years after I graduated, I was still self-employed. Self-employment can be very isolating. There were clients I worked *for*, but no one I worked *with*. I had no career-oriented community, and with the economy crashing I could no longer afford to wait for the writing to pan out. I had to decide what to do next, and I was overwhelmed. There were just so many options out there. Before I started working for myself, I'd done some bookkeeping. Many times I considered just going back to bookkeeping or getting some entry-level secretarial position. With my YSW experience though, I couldn't see myself settling for either of those careers. So rather than settle, I hunkered down and did my homework. I wanted a career that would lead to a team-oriented environment and that would support my writing. I vetted a lot of options before I chose paralegal.

Conclusion

Graduate students are encouraged, and doctoral students are required, to take on multi-semester projects and to disseminate their work through conferences and academic journals. They are also encouraged to give presentations at seminars and symposiums, and they often teach first-year classes or work as teaching assistants. The work graduate students did as undergraduates serves to win them these and other coveted positions. When a student does not go into academia, the usefulness of his or her completed academic work plummets significantly. Even in the paralegal field, where writing is such a significant part of the job, I did not need a writing sample for either of the paralegal positions I have landed.

Scholarship focuses so intensely on the ways in which undergraduate research encourages students to attend graduate school that stories like mine often don't end up being told (e.g., Bauer and Bennett or Tinto). Yet I have gained so many opportunities from my YSW experience.

I'm not asked to peer review for the journal as much as I once was, which means I treasure that experience even more, but I would not have been asked to peer review at all if I hadn't first been

published. Belonging to the Girls' Studies Book Club keeps me in touch with my intellectual roots, and I couldn't ask for a better, more supportive group of women with whom to be involved. Even the chance to write this essay and connect with a part of myself I don't visit very often is connected directly to my YSW experience. Honestly, I seldom look at the article I wrote all those years ago, but I do keep a copy of that YSW issue on my shelf and I find it comforting to have such an example of past success. It serves me also as a goad to future success.

Back at work, five o'clock is fast approaching. A paralegal from down the hall calls me. The attorney needs help putting together exhibits for a deposition in the morning. Can I help? We take over a conference room and recruit one of the secretaries to make copies for us. When we're done, the attorney has what he needs. I shut down my computer and turn off my office light before using the drive home to turn my attention back to my novel or to focus on a local community event with which I am involved.

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