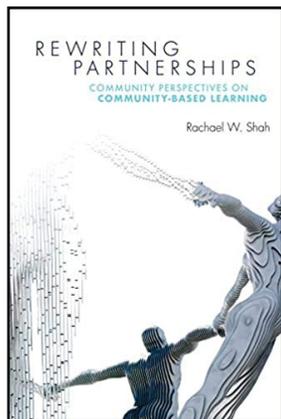


Book Review Editor

Russell Kirkscey, *Penn State Harrisburg*



Rewriting Partnerships: Community Perspectives on Community-Based Learning

Rachel W. Shah, Author

Logan, Utah

Utah State University Press

2020. 221 pp.

Reviewed by John Joseph Silvestro

Slippery Rock University

For technical and professional communication (TPC) faculty who are involved in community engagement work, Rachel W. Shah's *Rewriting Partnerships* raises some difficult questions. Many TPC programs have created partnerships, course projects, and/or internships with local community organizations, or in other words community engagement work (Allen & Benninghoff, 2004; Krammer-Simpson & Simpson, 2018; Matthews & Zimmerman, 1999). This work has allowed administrators to demonstrate a commitment to local communities (Peeples et al., 2007), provided teachers a way to offer more immediate considerations of social-justice issues (Jones, 2017), and has afforded TPC students opportunities to use their skills and knowledge outside of typical TPC industries (Mathis et al., 2016). In *Rewriting Partnerships*, Shah argues that while all those things are valuable, they also often come up short from the perspective of the community partners. Those approaches are often single-sided, only benefiting the program, the professor, and/or the students. The

community partners who do receive documents, minimal financial support, and opportunities to engage students (Kimme Hea & Shah, 2016) do not get the things they actually need or value.

Thus, *Rewriting Partnerships* calls for TPC community-engagement partners to be actual partners. They should have their values, needs, and wants made a central part of any community engagement or service-learning work. To make this point, Shah builds upon her prior work with Amy C. Kimme Hea in their 2016 article "Silent Partners." In that article, she and Kimme Hea interview several community partners and learn that TPC service-learning courses focus too much on creating deliverables. This focus leads the community partners to being relegated to a "deficit" position wherein the professors and students are the knowledge creators, bestowing knowledge onto the community partners (Kimme Hea & Shaw, 2016, p. 51). As Shah emphasizes in *Rewriting Partnerships*, the actuality of most community engagement situations is that the knowledge holders and producers are the community partners, or at the very least are co-producers of knowledge. So, *Rewriting Partnerships* outlines ways to radically expand how community engagement is both approached and understood. Specifically, Shah articulates a model that centers community partners' voices, needs, and knowledges.

In *Rewriting Partnerships*, Shah presents an epistemology for community engagement, *Critical Community-Based Epistemologies*, that aims to expand how administrators, teachers, and students approach community engagement. The epistemology draws together the community-focused theories of John Dewey, Cornell West, bell hooks, and others. Through her theory-building, Shah develops a broad framework that situates community partners as active knowledge producers, particularly when it comes to their own communities. Shah then enacts her framework by speaking with community partners she previously worked with, learning ways to make her framework more responsive to the needs and experiences of community partners. She interviews 83 past community partners, speaking with heads of non-profits, queer activists, and high school students. Out of her interviews, she identifies three specific epistemologies, each of which engender new approaches to community engagement: the "Epistemology of Experience," the "Epistemology of Participation," and the "Epistemology of Assets."

Each of Shah's three epistemologies seeks to expand the ways everyone – administrators, teachers, students, community members, and universities - participates in service learning. Each epistemology alters how administrators, professors, and students understand

community partners; each also provides community partners with new forms of agency over service-learning projects and community-engaged programs. First, the "Epistemology of Experience" enables instructors and students to center the emotions and ideas of community partners. This approach calls instructors and students to work with and value community partners' emotions and ideas in their projects. Second, the "Epistemology of Participation" outlines how knowledge that is useful to multiple groups arises through collaborations. This approach enables individuals to situate community partners as co-producers of knowledge. Third, the "Epistemology of Assets" holds that marginalization can bring special insights that often cannot be seen from privileged positions. This approach urges individuals to learn from and work with the insights and experiences of community members, particularly those from marginalized communities. Through this framework, community partners can be situated as important leaders for community-engaged projects. Shah then dedicates a chapter to each epistemology, outlining application in common community engagement or service-learning sites.

Of particular interest to TPC teachers, Shah devotes "Chapter 3: Networks" to writing for nonprofit service-learning projects. Writing for nonprofit projects has become a common TPC service-learning project (Cargile Cook, 2014; Krammer-Simpson & Steveson, 2018). Enacting her epistemologies, Shah provides the perspectives of the nonprofit leaders, staff, and volunteers that her University of Arizona students worked with. The leaders, staff, and volunteers explain that the deliverables created for their nonprofits have had significant issues. The community partners revealed that the deliverables often failed to speak from a nonprofit perspective, thus needing to be substantially rewritten or abandoned. The community partners then offered several ideas on how to correct this issue in future service-learning and/or writing for nonprofit courses. The partners said that students should spend more time researching the organizations they work with and that students should be taught to be more direct in their communications. The pedagogical insights that Shah gained from speaking with community partners demonstrates how her framework can be used to focus student service-learning projects so that they are more generative for and respectful of community partners.

TPC administrators would benefit from "Chapter 5: Rewriting Architectures," which details how to enact *Critical Community-Based Epistemologies* in the management of community-engaged programs. Shah argues that community-engaged programs are typically only held responsible to a university's self-serving "upward" metrics

(2020, p. 130). So, Shah articulates ways to enact more “downward accountability” that responds to the needs of community partners (2020, p.131). Shah articulates an approach to program management that focuses on interrogating institutional structures to generate better accountability for community partners. Shah then demonstrates how she developed this approach through her work on community advisory boards for her various community partners. She also outlines how this work can be enacted through participatory program evaluations and community grading of student work.

While offering much-needed frameworks, Shah’s epistemology seems rooted largely in the possibilities of individuals working at R1 institutions. In the book’s conclusion, Shah acknowledges that “overworked faculty, sagging department support, unrecognized labor, [and] job insecurity” (2020, p. 180) are all barriers to community-engaged work, but then suggests that overworked and underfunded faculty simply find time to get coffee with community members. Thus, *Rewriting Partnerships* has blind spots around the possibilities of teachers with heavy teaching loads and/or administrators managing programs with little institutional support. For example, how should instructors, who do not have the funds to transport students, properly engage community partners? Thus, *Rewriting Partnerships* is both needed and incomplete. Significant questions remain about how individuals with little support, time, and/or resources can enact Shah’s epistemologies. Hopefully, individuals in those positions can read *Rewriting Partnerships* and develop projects that address these gaps.

Ultimately, *Rewriting Partnerships* empowers TPC administrators and teachers to address some of the inequities in their service-learning work. For teachers, the book offers a framework that enables them to rethink how they approach service-learning projects. Teachers can use *Rewriting Partnerships* to revise how they generate service-learning projects and how they situate community partners during those projects. For administrators, the book provides several approaches for re-seeing community engagement and its value. Administrators can use Shah’s work to develop tactical infrastructures that situate community partners as knowledge-producers whose needs should be addressed through program work and assessment. *Rewriting Partnerships* offers new and needed frameworks for community engagement work.

References

- Allen, Nancy & Benninghoff, Steven T. (2004). TPC program snapshots: Developing curricula and addressing challenges. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 13(2), 157-186.
- Cargile Cook, Kelli. (2014). Service learning and undergraduate research in technical communication programs. *Programmatic Perspectives*, 6(1), 27-51.
- Jones, Natasha N. (2017). Modified immersive situated service learning: A social justice approach to professional communication pedagogy. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 80(1), 6-28.
- Kimme Hea, Amy C. & Shah, Rachel W. (2016). Silent partners: Developing a critical understanding of community partners in technical communication service-learning pedagogies. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 25(1), 48-66.
- Krammer-Simpson, Elisabeth & Simpson, Steve. (2018). Technical communication client projects and nonprofit partnerships: The challenges and opportunities of community engagement. In Godwin Y. Agboka & Natalia Matveeva (Eds.), *Citizenship and Advocacy in Technical Communication* (pp. 91-109). Routledge.
- Mathis, Keri E., Faver Hartline, Megan, Boehm, Beth A., & Sheridan, Mary P. (2016). Building infrastructures for community engagement at the University of Louisville: Graduate models for cultivating stewardship. *Community Literacy Journal*, 11(1), 146-156.
- Matthews, Catherine & Zimmerman, Beverly B. (1999). Integrating service learning and technical communication: Benefits and challenges. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 8(4), 383-404.
- Peebles, Timothy, Rosinski, Paula & Strickland, Michael. (2007). “Chronos” and “kairos”, strategies and tactics: The case of constructing Elon University’s professional writing and rhetoric concentration. *Composition Studies*, 35(1), 57-76.

Author Information

Dr. John J. Silvestro is an Assistant Professor of English with a focus on Digital and Professional Writing at Slippery Rock University. He teaches and researches the ways information can, and cannot, circulate in publics. He also oversees Slippery Rock University’s Professional Writing program.