Language arts pedagogies are often constructed within a democratic framework, in which the teaching of reading and writing provides access to civic participation and democratic life, yet these participatory goals are not always easy to achieve. As a teacher and teacher educator in Arizona, a state known for having some of the most restrictive immigration legislation in the country, I often work with secondary students who are limited in their access to civic participation and democratic practices simply by the nature of their immigration status. For students who are citizens, but have parents or siblings who are not in the country legally, participation in certain types of civic life can be risky because of the potential to draw attention to undocumented family members.

Teachers who work in communities where belonging and not belonging have the potential for devastating legal repercussions cannot think of democratic participation in the same way as teachers who know that the majority of their students are citizens, and therefore have the potential for traditional modes of civic participation, such as voting or even access to federal or state financial aid for college. That is, in classrooms where the risk of civic or community participation is low, teachers may incorporate writing that helps students gain awareness of the full range of participatory actions in democratic society. However, in classrooms where teachers believe, or perhaps even know, that a number of their students, or members of the students’ families, do not have citizenship, the potential for democratic access and participation look quite different and have more risks attached.

This does not mean that students in ethnically and linguistically diverse communities should be restricted from the types of writing that open up opportunities for democratic participation. Rather, I contend that teachers, especially in states with restrictive immigration legislation or a large number of immigrant students, must carefully consider ways that students move beyond the classroom walls as they explore the potential for participation in their communities. In this article, I will share specific examples from two ninth-grade English classes in which students, many of whom had questionable immigration statuses, engaged in a project that uses an inside-out approach to the teaching of community-based writing for action. I define the inside-out approach to writing as building on students’ knowledge, values, and concerns to see the potential for writing that brings about action by moving beyond the classroom into community and civic spaces. This approach is beneficial because it further opens up access to democratic and civic life through social capital and, more specifically, writing capital (Bourdieu; Compton-Lilly; Yosso). Writing from the inside out is a pedagogical approach that builds upon existing and past efforts to access community and civic spaces. There are myriad possibilities for implementing the inside-out approach in the secondary language arts classroom.
Working from the Inside Out

Community-based writing projects often focus on ways of tightening up the space between school and the community. As a byproduct of this focus, students gain writing experience targeted at expanding access to the processes of participation in local communities and beyond. These projects can, and often do, take an outside-in approach to community involvement in which experts or professionals come from the outside into the school. For example, Michelle Cox, Christina Ortmeier-Hooper, and Katherine Tirabassi advocate for what I call an outside-in approach to real-world or professional writing. This approach is certainly valuable in terms of providing students with access to businesspeople in the community as they work on business-focused writing. However, the approach assumes that students will later be able to transfer skills in gaining access to businesspeople on their own. Therefore, an outside-in approach assumes students have the experiences to eventually gain access.

The quite opposite approach in classrooms, often used with ethnically and linguistically diverse students, is an insular approach that neglects real audiences for writing instruction, instead focusing on remedial schooled writing practices (Rose, “Language,” Lives). This happens for three reasons. First, teachers who suspect that introducing students to people from the outside has the potential to expose a questionable immigration status, might avoid contact with adults beyond the school walls. Second, students from ethnically and linguistically diverse communities are perceived to have learning deficits or to be struggling writers (Quiñonez and Daoud; Zentella). The response in that case is to remediate them often via standardized writing forms. In “The Popularity of Formulaic Writing (and Why We Need to Resist),” Mark Wiley argues that this type of instruction is provided for “struggling” writers, who then never learn to move beyond the formula. Wiley notes that these writers “are not accustomed to offering interpretations and opinions about what they read and who have no confidence that their views will be considered seriously by their teachers”; therefore, they learn the formula and format for a traditional schooled essay but do not come to see the way that writing brings about actions in life outside of school (65).

Finally, teachers may feel uncertain about opening up their curriculum and classrooms to the community or outside world. Teachers, too, may perceive a great risk in creating and implementing an inside-out curriculum since this type of curriculum may deviate from existing or common teacher practices (Early and DeCosta).

While inside-out and insular approaches, especially when employed out of a concern for student safety, have a place in the language arts curriculum, guiding students who lack access to community and civic participation to use writing to obtain this access often requires an inside-out approach. As noted earlier, an inside-out approach is one that begins with the students’ knowledge, values, and concerns and builds on these elements in helping students to see potential for action beyond the classroom into community and civic spaces. Although not described in this manner, this is the type of approach Julie Gorlewski describes taking with working-class students in her article “Christ and Cleavage: Multiculturalism and Censorship in a Working-Class, Suburban High School.” Gorlewski encourages students to work from their own concerns about censorship in producing letters to textbook editors. I argue that for students lacking access and experience with existing power structures in their local communities, the inside-out approach provides a safe way to encourage the types of writing that provide students with experience using writing for community and civic participation.

The Students and Their Work

In a specific project with two ninth-grade classes at an urban high school in Arizona I worked with classroom teachers to experiment with an inside-out community-based project that, as its end result, encouraged students to participate in their school and local communities. In this group of students, 96 percent identified as Latino or Chicano, and while I was not certain of their individual immigration statuses, it became clear that a number of them...
were undocumented or had undocumented family members. For example, a student named Claudia told me, "I always got taught [sic] that no matter what, your education's first and since my sisters are undocumented, it makes me want to work harder." Comments like Claudia's were frequent and helped me to see the ways immigration status influenced students' perceptions of school and access to institutions and structures beyond their high school.

This particular project fulfilled the research requirement of the state standards. Along with a blogging project (Saidy and Hannah), the students chose issues of community concern for the basis of their research projects. Some of the issues chosen were immigration/the Dream Act; child abuse and neglect/foster care; and alcohol and drug abuse. Students worked in research groups for this project, so some of their individual concerns were grouped under larger topic umbrellas. For example, two students interested in the Dream Act were placed together with other students concerned about immigration (including deportations and traditional paths to citizenship). The grouping of the students was practical—students could cover more research ground when they were sharing sources—and, at the same time, as ideological—we believed that students working on community issues should have opportunities to work as communities of writers and researchers. While some of the topics described above may arise in any classroom, the students were urged to think about how the topics were specific to their communities. For example, Jenny, a student who worked in the research group investigating the Dream Act says that she chose her topic because "I wanted to find a way to help my cousins and inform others." Ana described her interest in studying drug abuse as stemming from her own family: "My brother is addicted to drugs. He has been using drugs ever since he was 7." While Ana notes that her topic was, in part, motivated by her desire to help her brother, she goes on to say, "I just want to let teenagers know we can help you. We can prevent other teens to stop doing this, so we can save their lives." Jenny's and Ana's responses illustrate the core of an inside-out approach. Carlos, a student investigating child abuse, talked about why he was motivated to explore this topic, saying, "It is important to me because I know many people that have been abused." Carlos wanted to bring about change, yet his comments reflect his understanding of the limits of change as well. He commented, "I want to help people to prevent child abuse . . . I know that we can’t prevent everything but at least we can stop some of it." These students were all aware of the issues they were investigating through personal experience and saw some potential for action.

Researching Community-Based Issues: Moving beyond the Classroom

Students in this particular community-based research project began their research much like students in any other classroom—on computers searching for academic texts via library databases. However, what differentiated this project was the grouping of students in their small research communities. In these communities, students worked to share findings, discuss issues, and narrow topics with specific guidance. Therefore, the students began this project in the classroom and in the school databases. However, the goal was to get them to do research outside of the school and in their local communities. This type of problem solving simulates the co-thinking that communities undertake in democratic decision-making processes. Claudia, a student who often came across as a group leader, described the way she learned from her group, saying, "Well, everybody’s really bright but everybody had their own special . . . they’re special at something. Like, their own specialty kind of." Like the other students, Claudia came to see the expertise of each of her group members. As students developed their own expertise, they investigated ways to move from the inside out and to explore avenues for accessing expertise of those outside of the classroom.
To make this move from the inside out, students worked in their research communities to identify community members and professionals who would be appropriate interview subjects for their research projects. The interview stage was important to the inside-out approach because it was the students’ first opportunity to approach adult experts beyond the classroom and typically beyond the school. However, it was at this point that the students’ visions of themselves as active participants in the lives of their communities became an issue. For one, we found that, like many ninth-graders, these students were unsure about how to assess adult expertise, contact adults for interviews, and engage adults in interview conversations. For example, one group called me over and asked me if I might be able to help them contact a law professor from the local university since I work at the same university. This group not only lacked knowledge about institutional structures and size, but they were reticent to contact this person on their own. This example illustrates another important point: some of the students were reluctant to contact community members for interviews, suggesting that they may not have exposure to the broader community or that the interviews were a new experience in which the students took risks.

Therefore, this portion of the research project focused on specific rhetorical strategies for contacting and interviewing adults in the community and best practices for completing research safely—go to your interview in pairs or groups, tell an adult where you are going, or take an adult with you to the interview. The rhetorical strategies for this section focused on deepening the students’ understanding of their audience. Audience considerations are typically important for students moving from adolescent to adult audiences, and even more important when students are moving from communities of belonging to communities in which they do not typically belong.

The interviews were an integral part of the research project since they gave the students the opportunity to interact in the community in a way that began to help them envision their research differently. For example, Jenny, who was researching the Dream Act, worked with her research group to interview an immigration lawyer. Jenny explained that the lawyer gave the group some knowledge it didn’t understand about the Dream Act. She explains, “She [the lawyer] explained what the Dream Act is, and she said that it was a just a two-year program, and it is temporary, and it does give you an opportunity to gain citizenship.” Other members of Jenny’s group echoed the lawyer’s information that the Dream Act was a program, not a law. Julia, a member of Jenny’s research group, noted that the lawyer they interviewed taught her about “helping these teenagers . . . try to reach their goals.” The act of interviewing helped the groups identify the ways that their research problem is viewed outside of the school setting and their immediate communities and begin to see potential avenues for their own participation in their local communities.

For some of the students, the interviews served a secondary purpose that the teachers and I did not anticipate. Some of the students reported keeping in touch with their interviewees and using them as resources as they moved toward their professional goals. For example, Claudia describes exchanging emails with her interviewee following the interview: “I asked her for some statistics because she told us that if we needed websites and stuff like that. She gave me some and then she emailed me asking me about our blogs and I sent her the email address.” In this case, the interviewee took an interest in the work the students were doing. The students were encouraged by her interest. Furthermore, Claudia hopes to one day be a social worker, just like the interviewee. Therefore, the potential exists for the interviewee to be a resource for Claudia for some time. Claudia and other students came to see potential in their interviewees for gaining access or coming to know their communities in a different way.

**Imagining the Possibilities: Writing for Participatory Change**

Inviting students to explore, take an interest in, and propose changes to their local communities also requires teachers to reconsider the types of writing they ask students to do. In this research project, students were asked to consider their real audience—in their blogs, interviews, and, finally, their written product. Since a large part of the project was learning about ways to gain access and affect change in local communities, it would not have necessarily served the students to write a traditional research paper for which the teacher was the only audience. The
traditional research paper, while important, has limited reach beyond the classroom teacher. Therefore, I worked with the teachers to consider the different genres of public writing in which students could still demonstrate their research knowledge and write for a community audience. In essence, we had to work together to consider how to help students compose in ways that were actionable.

After much discussion we decided to require students to create brochures that would be targeted to their specific audiences. While we considered a number of different genres—additional blog entries, technical reports, magazine-type articles—we agreed that a brochure would offer students the opportunity to meet the standards for research writing while meeting the needs of a community. The brochure genre also required students to consider what they knew in technical or research terms and make that information comprehensible for their audiences. Finally, brochures are often informative calls to action. That is, the brochure genre gave students an opportunity, and space, to consider ways their audiences could act in their communities. In essence, the brochure enabled the individual students to see themselves as catalysts for change in their communities. The genre gave students experience with the types of writing done in community and civic spaces when trying to persuade a group to act in a certain way.

The students were provided with minilessons on brochure writing that focused on the rhetorical moves and genre characteristics. The students began by exploring brochures created by governmental groups—one on water use and one on hand washing for public health. We chose these brochures so that students were exposed to topics that appealed to civic participants, conceived broadly. In the lessons, students explored the rhetorical moves made in the brochures, including the design of the brochures and the placement of relevant information. Students were encouraged to use the brochures as models for design, writing for an audience, and conveying researched information. As the students created their own brochures, we returned to the idea of audience, asking them to consider the audience’s ability to participate in the ways that they suggested in their brochures. The teachers and I were concerned that the students’ solutions would be too broad or impossible for the audience to actually achieve, which is why issues of audience were central to the students’ composing and touched on repeatedly.

The majority of student groups focused on audiences that they thought could be persuaded to affect change—their school communities or adults in their immediate communities. This move was important because students came to see change as an inside-out activity. For example, the group that worked on researching the Dream Act proposed two specific courses of action for students in their schools. The first was a school sit-in sanctioned by the administration. The sit-in would be modeled after another successful sit-in at the school in the past that had drawn attention to the students and their cause. In this way, the students in this group came to see the way that action works from the inside out, as they were hoping the sit-in would draw media attention to the cause they were covering. The group’s second suggestion was that students in their school should join local community-based groups working toward increased legislation for “dreamers,” or children brought to the United States illegally and hoping for a path to citizenship. While suggesting that the audience join established groups may seem unremarkable, this research group, some of whom were “dreamers” themselves, had no knowledge of these groups prior to their research, nor did the majority of their classmates. Providing a list of suggested groups offered their audience a path to action that was both possible and that, because of the sheer number of participants in these existing groups, was likely to bring about change.

Students talked about how they were proud of the way their brochures communicated information that had the potential to bring about community change. Julia, a member of the group who worked on the Dream Act, discussed a part of her brochure, a profile of a student at a local high school: “The thing that I’m most proud of in my brochure is that I got to write a personal experience of this teenager... she graduated then she tried to go to college and she couldn’t.” Julia was proud of making her issue real for her audience, of persuading them to make change. Nina, a member of the group working on child abuse, said, “The thing I am most proud of in my brochure is adding how it impacts life and how it actually does change someone’s life in the future.” Martin, a student writing about teen drug abuse,
that he was proud of the way his brochure provided "[n]umbers. Telephone numbers and stuff they could call for help." These students came to see their writing for its potential to bring about action in their communities. Moreover, they came to see writing, in general, as something meant for a real audience.

**Seeing the Potential for Action Inside Out**

An inside-out approach encourages students to use writing to build on their existing knowledge and values as they carve out spaces for action in their own communities. For students who face risk in moving beyond school, because of immigration status or other factors, the inside-out approach provides guided exploration of community and civic participation in safe ways. Because of its emphasis on public writing for real audiences, the inside-out approach is a rigorous alternative to insular approaches that rely on formulaic writing for "struggling" writers. In particular, this approach focuses on increasing access to community and civic life by teaching students how to build their own expertise, engage with experts in their communities, and see the potential for contributing to their communities.

**Works Cited**


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