



Writing Stories of Gifts, Talents, and Passions: Narrative as a Way to Disrupt Deficit Perspectives

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THE COURSE: ENG 210 PUBLIC ACTION WRITING

This community-engaged learning course explores how public literacy practices advocate community perspectives, document lived experience, and produce social texts. Students research contemporary and local uses of public writing, engage in written literacy practices that shape public discourse, and explore public applications of writing. Students produce at least one collaborative community literacy project and meet regularly off-campus.

CHALLENGING DEFICIT NARRATIVES & IDENTITIES

ENG 210 focuses on the Near Northwest Area (NNW), an area Marian is located within. The NNW is often defined through **deficit narratives** by city leaders, local media, and Central Indiana residents.

Deficit Narratives:

Dominant narratives that needs, concerns, or deficits. Defining a person, community, or place lacks while overlooking assets, abilities, knowledge, expertise, or desires.



The Near Northwest Boundary Area

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP: THE LEARNING TREE

We partner with The Learning Tree, a neighbor collective located in the NNW that specializes in the asset based community development. Its guiding principles are:

1. You Must See We
2. Learning is Key
3. We Must Break Rules
4. Love is What We Strive For
5. Develop a Gift Economy
6. Follow the Story as Well as the Investment (2)

INTRODUCING DESIRE-BASED FRAMEWORKS & ABCD

To prepare students for relational community engagement, we first explore **desire based frameworks** as a replacement script for deficit narratives.

Desire Based Frameworks:

“craft research to capture desire instead of damage... [and are] concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives... documenting not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope.” (3)

The Learning Tree trained ENG 210 and ART 101 in asset-based community development (ABCD), a form of community development that focuses on assets rather than deficits. This training was made possible by a grant from the Indiana Campus Compact.

FORMING RELATIONSHIPS / SHARING LITERACIES

What might it mean to write from a desire and asset-based perspective?

The class met regularly at Cleo’s Bodega, at The Learning Tree, and in homes of NNW residents. We collected stories at neighborhood events, engaged in listening tours, and participated in community meals. The class wrote with residents to challenge dominant deficit narratives about the NNW and investigated what it means when these narratives are internalized.



DISRUPTING DEFICIT PERSPECTIVES

For the final project, the students in ENG 210 decided to create a “guidebook” about the Near Northwest Area: *Why the Near Northwest?* This guidebook assembles responses from Marian students and community residents and was written over a series of dialogues and community meals.

Why the Near Northwest? is designed to challenge misconceptions about the NNW and subtly invite readers to interrogate their own reliance upon deficit narratives. The guidebook will be made available to prospective and incoming Marian University students as well as parents.

COMMUNITY ENGAGED LEARNING AT MARIAN

ENG 210 Public Action Writing asks students to challenge deeply embedded social stories, develop relationships with community residents, and explore how writing is used to share community expertise. This type of community engaged learning works to enact the Franciscan Values in tangible and transformative ways. ENG 210 works to cross borders of difference and examine structural issues by forming relationships and providing witness to one another.

This learning has meaningful implications. For example, racial reconciliation typically emerges as a central theme within the course. Marian is a predominately white institution. 52.3% of NNW residents identify as Black or African American. (3) By honoring community expertise and working alongside residents, students are encouraged to view society through humanizing, desire-based frames.

LITERATURE CITED

- 1: thelearningtrees.org/our-mission
- 2: Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3), 409-428.
- 3: American Fact Finder; U.S. Census Bureau, accessed Jan. 5, 2020