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Report of CTL-funded Initiative: Poetry in/and the Community

In the spring of 2006, the CTL generously funded \$300 to a course-related project I have just recently completed. The course was English 330: Intermediate Poetry, which I renamed “Poetry in/and the Community” to better reflect the course’s focus. The main goals of the course were to broaden and deepen the students growing knowledge of the craft of poetry by discussing the craft and cultural context of poetry from our textbook and applying that knowledge to the crafting of the students’ own original poetry. I created the Community Poetry Project as a part of this course in order to allow my students to apply the course subject matter in a writing situation outside of the classroom, with other writers who were not affiliated with Miami University. This CTL-funded project—detailed below—asked students to collaborate with members of the Middletown Poetry Circle, a group of poets who have been writing together and advocating for writing and literacy in the community for a number of years. The students and community members discussed the relationship between poetry and a community, developed and shared their own poems with each other, organized a public poetry reading, and published a chapbook of their poems for public distribution. The CTL funding was directed toward providing extensive advertising and refreshments for the public reading, and publishing the chapbook.

The project participants met once a week over the course of six weeks. The participants included my seven poetry students—undergraduates with little or no formal training in poetry writing, and no poetry publications beyond local venues such as *Illuminati*—and five members of the Middletown Poetry Circle. The MPC members brought a remarkable diversity to the project: one was an undergraduate from the Oxford campus, but the others were significantly older than my students, with more experience in writing and publishing, and vastly different ways of writing, thinking, and talking about poetry. Our discussions revolved around defining what a community is, what poetry is and does in a community, and how a community affects what and how a poet writes. Rather than try to find an answer to these questions, we simply explored possible answers from our varying perspectives, and continued discussing those answers as we conducted peer-review workshops of our own original poetry. Participants exchanged drafts of poems in small groups, wrote

informal responses to them, and shared those responses with their group members. The goal was not only to develop and hone the poetry, but to explore further how the poem was being affected by the communities of readers it would address and the communities that influenced the poet's own self-identity.

When we weren't discussing poetry or developing our own poems, we planned our public poetry reading. The project participants divided into four teams: a location team, an organization team, an advertising team, and a chapbook team. The location team was responsible for scouting possible locations for our reading in or around Middletown, discussing possibilities with all the project participants, and working with venue staff to formally reserve our location—the Franklin Public Library, May 13th, at 2:30. The organization team was responsible for working with the library staff to ensure that all of our physical needs could be met, arranging for refreshments to be served, and setting up the room on the day of the reading. The advertising team developed advertisements which were distributed to listservs, regional newspapers, and radio and television stations. They also created flyers and full color posters to distribute throughout the community. The chapbook team was responsible for creating and publishing a chapbook of the participants' poetry, and distributing it to local libraries and other venues. As the project progressed, the participants voted to name our group and our chapbook "Sojourners: A Community Poetry Project."

The entire project went off without a hitch. Rather than simply present our poetry to the public at our reading, we decided to turn the event into an open mic reading by inviting audience members to share their own poetry, as well, in a celebration of community. Unfortunately, the reading was not well-attended by the public, though a few people not affiliated with the project did read with us. Nonetheless, we were able to celebrate our efforts in a public forum, and to distribute a physical record of our efforts to several regional libraries. More importantly, I believe all the project participants got something valuable out of the project. I feel my students, especially, saw poetry "in action" through this project, and came to understand poetry as an act of communication that has an impact on communities of people, rather than as a dry exercise undertaken and understood by only a handful of isolated intellectuals. I'm still gathering feedback on the project from all the participants, which in itself is remarkable: the course is over, my students could be moving on, but they're still discussing ways to improve the project for future courses. Personally, I can't wait to try it again.

I will send the CTL copies of the chapbook as further evidence that the project met its goals. Thank you very much for your support.

Sincerely,

Eric Melbye