

Goldblatt, Eli. *Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum*. New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2007.

Reviewed by Genesea M. Carter

Because We Live Here showcases Goldblatt's skills as storyteller and researcher to illustrate how Philadelphia's Temple University writing program navigates literacy concerns and relationships with surrounding urban community programs and educational institutions. While Goldblatt primarily focuses on first-year writing at Temple, writing instructors of all levels, particularly those interested in building literacy partnerships with the community, will find his narrations and data valuable material. As the title suggests, Goldblatt's book is an open "letter" to Philadelphians: He calls educators to cast aside their often-stifling academic obligations and move to break down the walls and make connections that transcend socioeconomic and urban lines—because, as Goldblatt asserts, *we live here*. Such a call asks educators to consider how their symbiotic relationships with each other directly and indirectly affect their neighborhoods and communities.

The common thread among these fifteen chapters is the vital focus on establishing successful working relationships within Philadelphia's community—cross-pollinated relationships between students and teachers, among faculty of local institutions, and among community organizations. In the Introduction, Goldblatt states that literacy education "must take into account the inside and outside, the domestic and foreign, the on-campus and off-campus and the community-based in order to make writing and reading instruction more responsive to the complex needs that arise in urban circumstances" (2).

In particular, Goldblatt challenges his Philadelphian colleagues to come out of their classrooms and offices and into their communities; this move from inside-to-out requires educators to

ponder their institutional and neighborhood relationships. Goldblatt writes:

I believe we need to work with ‘other’ organizations, and those organizations by and large exist outside the walls of the typical American campus (2). . . . many of us have come to the conclusion that in order to make things better for our particular constituents we must take into account the interconnections among schools, neighborhoods, literacy centers, 2- and 4-year colleges, and universities. (3)

Establishing relationships among community members are necessary to 1) start the conversation about education and 2) create links between educational institutions. As a result of these symbiotic relationships, students reap the benefits and transition easier from primary to secondary to higher education.

The first three chapters, “Writing Within, Across, Beyond,” “Continuity and Control,” and “Deep Alignment and Sponsorship,” address the need for a stronger network of relationships among feeder schools and Temple University. In “Writing Within, Across, Beyond,” Goldblatt explains: “The more reciprocal the relationship we build with other institutions or agencies, the greater potential for the project to affect the college program as much as it affects the neighborhood center” (21). This network is crucial between high schools, two-year colleges, and Temple to ensure the most cohesive hand off between educational levels; such cohesion will serve to successfully bridge students’ learning and writing processes.

In chapter two, “Continuity and Control,” Goldblatt examines data collected from regional, feeder high schools to determine trends in academics and retention rates in Temple’s writing program. Goldblatt discovered, “to the surprise of no one, students from wealthier areas did better in our university” (36). With this realization, Goldblatt begins asking himself: “Why does this disparity occur? What are we doing about it? And are we making the transition to college writing productive and

enlightening to all our students?" (36). To answer those questions, Goldblatt visits thirty-three regional public and private schools to determine how students are transitioning to Temple University's writing program.

Of these thirty-three schools, Goldblatt looked at three measures of data from 1995-2000 to determine students' transitions into Temple: 1) GPA averages in first Fall semester, 2) Percentage of students who did not return to Temple the start of their second year, and 3) Percentage of students placed into basic writing (38). Sifting through the data Goldblatt determined that 63% of city public high school students were placed into basic writing. In addition, first semester GPAs at Temple were in the 2.3-2.5 range for city comprehensive and Catholic high school students. And from 1997-2001 more than 40% of Temple's first-year students indicated their fathers had not received a college education (40). Sifting through these numbers, Goldblatt concludes:

We could develop the best possible first-year courses, train teachers with the best mentors and the most thought-provoking articles in the field, but if our classrooms remain mere way-stations, disconnected from what has come before and what will confront students afterward, then we are doing little more than practicing a more efficient way to tighten a single bolt on an assembly line. (45)

Because hand offs between educational institutions are not perfect, and writing styles among faculty and institution are often distant cousins, more successful partnerships and support among faculty, community colleges, and high schools are critical. Goldblatt does not place blame upon institutions or faculty members. Instead, he acknowledges the raw truth: Educators do not always work together the way they should, and the segmentation affects all educational levels.

Like Mike Rose, Victor Villanueva and others, Goldblatt uses colorful personal and autobiographical narratives as discursive

frames in chapters four and five, “Alinsky’s Reveille” and “Lunch.” In “Alinsky’s Reveille” Goldblatt recounts Saul Alinsky’s 1938 community work in Chicago’s West Side to exemplify how community activism can benefit neighborhoods. Alinsky built relationships with the West Side community—from children to parents—in order to empower the residents and move them out of political and economic obscurity. Goldblatt writes that Alinsky “cared a great deal about how ordinary people learn to act for their own good and the good of their neighbor” (124). To help educators facilitate “community-based learning,” Goldblatt lists seven principles adapted from Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals* to consider:

1. Draw on the inevitability of class and group conflict as well as the unpredictability of events for your creativity to invent tactics that fit the moment.
2. Be guided by a broadly defined sense of self-interest, taking on multiple issues, and encourage all other participants to do the same.
3. Try to see every situation in as stark a light as possible, unblurred by ideological imperatives, traditional hatreds, or conventional moralities.
4. Communicate with others on their own ground, amassing personal experience and solid relationships among people with whom you intend to work.
5. Respect the dignity of people by creating the conditions for them to be active participants in solving their own problems rather than victims or mere recipients of aid.
6. Shape educational experiences that matter in people’s lives by helping individuals identify issues they can grasp and do something about.
7. Build the leadership capacity of the group being organized and take as the goal the independent functioning of that community.

These principles “frame learning in the context of doing” (128) and challenge educators and administrators still sitting in their offices, bogged down by academic obligations, to put aside their academic duties and refocus on their communities. Goldblatt asks:

But what if we start from the activist’s ground in this instance, learning before we act, developing relationships and commitments before we organize classes and set up research projects? . . . What if we use our research, teaching, and administrative, and writing abilities for the sake of the people our students tutor [the community members], not for the sake of the college programs we run? (130)

Through the example of Saul Alinsky’s work, Goldblatt offers another vision. He recognizes the conflict between the competing values of the classroom versus the community, and educators often choose the classroom over the community. Perhaps by focusing on the needs of the community first, educators can better meet the needs of their communities, neighborhoods, and ultimately their classrooms.

In “Lunch,” Goldblatt recounts his time as 2002-2003 chair of “the Core,” Temple’s undergraduate general education curriculum. Like the rest of the chapters focusing on relationships, he emphasizes the importance of taking literacy conversations out of the board room and into the “lunch room” since “literacy education depends on a network of relationships that must be carefully nurtured and maintained” (146). This chapter also shows how financial grants and sponsorships can do wonders in “lunch room” collaborations when “all participants feel invested” (162). As an example, Goldblatt recounts how the Temple University Writing Program, the Philadelphia Writing Project, the Philadelphia Writing Program Administrators, and the Center for Literacy partnered together in organizing the “Literacy Because We Live Here” conference in sponsorship with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

The final chapter, “On Circulation,” is a *mélange* of Goldblatt’s reflections and meditations—data collection, his mother’s death, literacy questions, and persistent problems. While this conclusion is not a typical end-of-the-book summation, Goldblatt wraps his assorted thoughts together by arguing that literacy research is needed in every situation, in every age group, and in all educational levels (204). In the last subsection titled “Are these efforts worthwhile?” Goldblatt is decidedly undecided. Instead, he says he is “happy to start over each time with a little more experience, a few more fellow Philadelphians to call on as friends and allies. After all, it’s our city” (208).

On the whole, *Because We Live Here* balances statistics, narratives, case studies, and musings. However, with so much to say in two hundred and eight pages, Goldblatt might overwhelm his readers. For example, in “Continuity and Control,” Goldblatt includes five subsections in a space of forty-eight pages: “An Overview of Regional Schools,” “First-Year GPA and Retention,” “Placement in Basic Writing,” “Visiting Schools,” “Two Schools,” and “Conclusions.” I believe these subtopics provide an important context for Goldblatt’s central focus; nevertheless, readers might process the information easier if packed chapters like this one were better prioritized and some of the supplementary details, such as the narrations and reflections, were pared down.

Additionally, for some readers Goldblatt’s stories might seem too anecdotal, and readers may be tempted to skim several pages. For the most part, however, the narrations are successfully interwoven between charts and statistics to keep the reader’s attention. More importantly, Goldblatt’s storytelling provides perspective and depth. Readers see firsthand the consequences students experience when educators get stuck focusing on the betterment of their own programs and departments and forget to look beyond their institution’s walls. For example, Goldblatt shares the story of a talented and driven Somerset high school student who was accepted into Tyler, Temple’s art school. Once at Tyler, the male student called Sara, his high school art teacher, saying, “They’re all white! But they’re all rich!” Despite being

Sara's best student, and scoring significantly higher than his other classmates on the SAT, he flunked his first art history test because he could not afford to purchase the textbook. While this student eventually bought the book, he felt too behind, so he dropped out of Tyler. Instead of cultivating his artistic capabilities, he started cutting hair and working at a supermarket (66). Anecdotes like the above offer tangible evidence that educators must move outside their offices and classrooms and take a close look at their communities. As Goldblatt shows, it is not enough that students have the grades and drive to enter university life—support, whether financial, emotional or academic, is integral to ensure student success in all levels of education.