<div align="right">**Mark Wiley**</div>

RESPONSE TO JOSEPH HARRIS'S "BEYOND COMMUNITY"

This sort of scholarly exchange within the same journal issue is rare, so I especially want to thank the editors of *JBW* and Professor Harris for giving me the opportunity to respond to Joe's essay (I hope I can drop the formal address here). In his introduction, Joe provides the context for the sequence of this exchange, so I'll not waste limited space repeating that.

Joe and I conversed briefly through email and agreed that our differences were less in principle and more in what we emphasize in our respective essays. Joe is not against the kind of work I advocate represented by the name *learning communities*, and I am not against the version of "materiality" he advocates. But then "against" is probably the wrong preposition to use here. It's more a matter of where we direct our attention and energies regarding this complex and complicated enterprise we call teaching first-year and basic writing. Although we did not articulate the actual principle on which we agree (I had not seen Joe's text before our email exchanges), it seems we both support paying attention to the kind of work our students do in our writing courses and to the quality of teaching offered them.

What we selectively attend to are the different elements involved in that enterprise. He pushes the public nature of writing, or at least pushing some kind of writing possessing a quality of "publicness," a writing that circulates more widely than within the confines of the classroom. And Joe particularly sees the material conditions of teaching as a far more useful site for critical analysis and action. I am paying attention to the quality of social relations between and among students and teachers and to the local institutional structures that can facilitate those relations and encourage a shift in the identities and perspectives students might take on. I hope it is understood that what I focus on requires attention to the material conditions of teaching. Those who create institutional structures that presently go under the name of learning communities are addressing teaching and responding to the local conditions within which that work takes place.

One of the reasons I became involved in a learning community was that it offered the composition faculty I supervise (all are part time) an opportunity to grow professionally and to break free of the confines of the individual classroom. These communities also provide a means whereby student writing can easily circulate more widely within

the learning community that extends beyond the borders of the single classroom. Participating faculty have the opportunity to transcend disciplinary boundaries because student writing specifically, and student learning in general, are the main concerns, a shift in focus that can, over time, change the purpose of general education courses from introducing students to discrete disciplines to cultivating the critical habits of mind Joe favors. Composition faculty who teach these linked courses are treated as equal to their tenure-track counterparts who typically teach the other discipline courses. Moreover, ideas for imaginative writing projects, like the ones Joe admires, emerge from this faculty interaction.

So, yes, we do agree in principle, and I acknowledge Joe's point about the material conditions of our work, but unless I am misreading him, what Joe advocates is perfectly in line with the goals of learning communities as I understand them. Consider some of his examples — service learning projects that transcend disciplinary boundaries, the sort of work exemplified by Mary Soliday at City College to make the writing curriculum more coherent, the time and support faculty need to develop innovative composition courses — this is work also facilitated through learning communities.

But as I continue to think about Joe's remarks here, perhaps the differences in what we emphasize are less significant than the rhetoric we respectively employ. Whereas he represents materiality as "beyond," I see it as an integral part of the social relations involved in the teaching of writing. Joe wants to move beyond talk about community because he views such talk as regressive. I don't understand though why he keeps insisting that community represents enclosure, like-mindedness, consensus (instead of argument and dissent), and social relations marked by a kind of touchy-feely sentimentality. Joe doesn't know of versions of community that "don't seem to lapse at key points into a nostalgia for the mutuality of family or the small town." I'm not sure what he is referring to, but I know that the many students I have either taught or met through the Learning Alliance have little understanding — let alone experience — of community, and I don't know of any who come from small towns — not those who live in Southern California, anyway. I wish it were true that all students' families offered them the kind of mutuality and emotional support one usually associates with family life, yet the reality, I suspect, is otherwise. That doesn't mean, of course, that students can't get sentimental notions about community from media representations; still, their social experiences overall, it seems to me, do not include anything we might call community where people do support one another and feel some measure of mutual responsibility.

Joe also questions how one learns to dissent and to cooperate and compromise. Perhaps I am naïve and I don't mean to be flip about

this, but I think faculty engage in dissent and still manage to cooperate and compromise regularly. Consider committee work and how we conduct ourselves in our home departments:

I can't imagine we would get much accomplished within them if we did not learn how to argue and dissent as well as recognize when compromise is a better strategy. Dissent can take a variety of forms. As a committee member, I can cast a dissenting vote and still not prevent the committee from completing its project. Dissent in that instance is a strategic way of cooperating, while in other instances a begrudging compromise might signal dissent. Where Joe seems to create a rigid opposition between consensus and dissent, I see in practice a more nuanced dialectic. Joe also asks, "Whose norms? Whose team?" The team belongs to the individuals who comprise it—students, faculty, and staff—who work together to achieve the goal of learning. These same participants help identify the norms they believe will secure that chief objective. Re-negotiation is always possible, and if an individual doesn't want to participate, she doesn't have to.

The rhetoric of "Beyond Community" should be familiar to those in our field who regularly read its scholarship. The title suggests progress: we must import different terms to theorize our work, and of course these terms define and confer value on the work identified. Materiality directs attention to our local scenes and reminds us that, as Joe, citing Richard Miller, notes, we must "embrace…[our] roles as mid-level bureaucrats in large corporations (universities) if …[we] are to have much hope of changing how those institutions work."

It would be foolish to ignore this institutional reality. I consciously selected the term "rehabilitate" (I rejected "rethink" and "re-imagine") because I liked the corporeal connotations of the word. I wanted to give body to a vague notion. Learning communities are real material structures. They cost money, they take planning, they shift (or potentially can shift) the nature of our work in the isolated comp class. Re-examining an old term for new meanings and possibilities seems like useful work to me. I recognize that "community" (like "voice"), although resonant in the wider culture, has negative connotations in the discipline of rhetoric and composition. Like voice, community sounds so regressive, while "materiality" keeps us grounded in such matters as labor issues and the production and circulation of student texts.

Metaphorically, materiality fits with "construction"; community doesn't. Materiality focuses attention on how power, status, and resources are distributed and maintained. Community assumes that these materials will be used to support learning while members work toward that goal. Whereas Joe sees opposition between community and public, I see complementarity. He keeps insisting (here and in his previous work) that we move away from disciplinary communities. That's fine, but I am moving in another direction and focusing on learn-

ing communities. He keeps thinking about communities as enclosed spaces, I want to consider their possibilities for opening different sorts of spaces on our campuses. I don't want to go beyond the social but instead find new meaning within an old term that identifies work that might resist the negative effects of corporatization on teaching and learning. Sure communities can be co-opted by corporations, but they can also remind us of other forms of relations that are not represented well by terms like "public, material, and circulation."

I want to resist getting caught up in a rhetoric that circumscribes a discursive space marked by oppositions such as regressive-progressive and old-new. Yet I would willingly-- no, enthusiastically-- cooperate with others like Joe who want to attend to the material conditions of our work.