

The Rhetoric of Making a Difference
Linda Flower, English 76-355/ 76-755
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People who choose to make a difference--out of a commitment to social justice and a desire to connect--must combine commitment with rhetorical skill and intercultural competence. They must be able to speak wisely for justice and persuasively for change in a corporate setting or a classroom. But equally important, they need the ability to “listen” across cultural difference themselves and to interpret alternative ways of reading the world.

This class is an introduction to the rhetoric of difference—to the strategies of listening and inquiry, of dialogue and persuasion, that are required to make a difference. The course combines theory and writing with a hands-on project in Pittsburgh’s urban community.

In the “on campus” segment, we focus, as writers, on strategies for problem posing, for seeking rival hypotheses from diverse perspectives, for negotiating differences, and for building an intercultural interpretation of an urban issue. Students learn a variety of rhetorical methods for doing intercultural inquiry—for seeking out culturally diverse interpretive schemas, for sharing “situated” knowledge, and for shaping new understandings in community problem-solving dialogues.

The “community segment” of the course will ask: “What does it take to succeed in the Pittsburgh culture of work—if you are inexperienced or underskilled; if you are a woman leaving welfare; if you can’t earn a living wage?” It offers a chance to work with the Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank—a culturally diverse group from the urban community, the university, schools, and business—who meet to explore problems, alternatives, and decisions around urban issues. Students will do field work to bring community perspectives on their question to the table and to build a revealing problem scenario using a multi-media tool, and will then participate in a formal Think Tank dialogue on the issues they raise. The final project report will speak to and for this diverse community.

Course work includes reading, regular B-Board dialogue, independent field work, and the final Think Tank project and report.