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## **“Biscit” Politics: Building Working-Class Educational Spaces from the Ground Up**

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This article examines Pecket Well College, a British user-led residential college for adult basic education, which was created by working-class adults with difficulties reading and writing. Tracing the development of Pecket, I argue that this self-directed model of literacy challenges notions of expertise, redefines intellectual and knowledge-creation work, and reenvisions pedagogical tools based on community abilities.

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*The agenda for developing powerful literacies has to be informed by issues of social justice, equality and democracy in everyday life rather than be limited to a narrow, functional definition primarily addressed to the needs of the economy. . . . Powerful literacies involve opening up the many voices that are silenced by the dominant definitions of literacy. It involves people deciding for themselves what is “really useful literacy” and using it to act, individually and collectively, on their circumstances to take greater control over them. Literacy is a resource for people acting back against the forces that limit their lives.*

—Lyn Tett, Mary Hamilton, and John Crowther,  
*More Powerful Literacies*

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Imagine a moment in 1984, when a group of about ten British working-class adult learners, most of whom had severe difficulties with reading and writing, were banned from the premises of their adult education center, Horton House, for a spelling error on a poster: “biscits.” After experiencing years of social and educational marginalization, these working-class adult

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learners were ironically dismissed from the very structure meant to enable their learning because of this misspelled word. The funding and support for their weekly magazine group was cut off, and they were unable to be at Horton House without a tutor present. Although these

events could have been devastating, the “biscits incident,” as it became known, represents a pivotal moment of collective organizing in support of these learners’ intellectual and political vision about themselves as citizens and literacy users—a moment of “powerful literacies” that illustrates how these learners decided to “ac[t] back against the forces that limit their lives” (Tett, Hamilton, and Crowther 5).

The “biscits incident” set many events into motion. First, the adult learners within the magazine group at Horton House went to the town hall in order to try and save their group. They were given a one-year reprieve at this time; however, this still meant that the adult learners would be out of a working space and support soon enough. The adult learners and their tutor were unhappy with this situation and wanted to find a different structure for their work over the next few months and for their long-term educational ambitions. The desire for change, particularly in the form of increased agency and decision making, led the learners and their tutor to brainstorm how they might create a new learning environment. These changes took multiple forms over the next few years: the group held meetings in people’s houses as they planned how they could support their own education; they raised funds through jumble (rummage) sales; and they made connections with local organizations in order to acquire a more permanent space to meet. Through these practical steps, they also began to establish a community that valued collaborative learning and challenged power dynamics that privileged only some learners. In fact, these values

prompted the learners to form activist networks, advocate for an expanded sense of agency for their marginalized community, and ultimately create Britain's first user-led residential college for adult learners: Pecket Well College (hereafter Pecket<sup>1</sup>).

Most notable about Pecket's development was that it was a college where members with various literacy levels and educational experiences were the founders as well as leaders for the facilitation, teaching, management, and direction of the organization. Said another way, people who had difficulties with reading and writing, some of whom were even illiterate, created this residential college and kept it going for nearly thirty years.<sup>2</sup> And they did so in a political environment, led by Margaret Thatcher, which was actively destroying many working-class institutions in the name of neoliberalism. In this way, the very creation of Pecket can be seen as a form of working-class collective politics.

Pecket demands our attention, then, as it represents the type of history that too often rests at the outskirts of our field's discussions of community literacy and disciplinary histories. Indeed, Pecket shows us how a group of working-class adult learners formed an educational community that functioned through collective organizing, peer learning, and a belief in equal participation. It demonstrates how such beliefs enabled them to use writing in ways that were useful for their own rhetorical purposes and social needs, including the creation of written products, educational workshops, and courses. Pecket demonstrates how people in marginalized positions have collectively developed literate and rhetorical skills to combat an educational system that excluded them for years and to resist a political moment that was working to dismantle collective organizing by the working class. As such, Pecket's self-directed model of literacy challenges traditional notions of expertise, redefines who participates in intellectual and knowledge-creation work, and reenvision pedagogical tools and curriculum based on community desires, abilities, and agency.

### **Locating Literacy Education in Working-Class Spaces**

Within composition and rhetoric, there are many examples of scholars tackling revisionist histories, aimed at uncovering people, identities, and communities that have been disregarded within our disciplinary focus. For instance, David Gold discusses how the field has productively expanded to include "alternative rhetorical traditions and sites of instruction and

production” through historiography and archival work that challenges dominant ideologies and historical constructions of the discipline (16). In recent years, scholars have used historiographic methodologies in ways that transcend disciplinary, gendered, racial, and sexual borders by reclaiming writing done from marginalized gendered identities (Glenn and Enoch; Jarratt; Rawson) and positioning historiography at the intersection of gender and race (Enoch; Royster). Less prevalent within these revisionist discussions, though, is the focus on sustained grassroots literacy sites and communities that were initiated without university assistance, particularly with a majority of adults who struggled with reading and writing.

Indeed, currently, the dominant examples of such grassroots organizing for educational purposes are the Highlander Folk School and the subsequent emergence of the Sea Island Citizenship Schools. Myles Horton co-founded Highlander to connect education with social change in Appalachia to “help the disadvantaged of all races help themselves, to challenge the status quo in the name of democracy and brotherhood” (Jacobs 4); this idea of education later prompted the Sea Island Citizenship Schools, which provided assistance for African Americans to develop the literacy skills needed to vote, and also prompted community-organized education. These examples provide clear articulations for how self-motivated and self-directed groups might be founded on the concept of literacy instruction that is disconnected from formal institutions (Branch; Kates; Lathan; Schneider) and aligns instead with more informal spaces of writing development. These examples highlight organic approaches toward literacy because these communities had to respond to the exigencies around them and develop skills that fit their needs within a given moment. In effect, they used literacy rhetorically to achieve a particular social purpose, such as to vote or to create different educational spaces.

Yet, beyond such examples, our field knows little of such work, despite its potential importance. Susan Kates argues that scholars must still do more to explore the origins of literacy practices beyond the university, particularly in regard to “the ways in which individuals who were pushed to the margins of our educational system, in various historical moments, learned to read and write” (500). Kates suggests the importance of community literacy practices centers on “understanding how individuals learned to read and write within the context of larger political and social goals” (500). Indeed, a model that we haven’t looked at enough is how alternative forms

of literacy and education have grown from largely self-organized and self-sustained collective efforts. And, too often, this failure comes at the expense of recognizing the bodies and populations that are still being marginalized in our classrooms and our scholarship—particularly the working class.

Working-class studies scholar William DeGenaro explains how class is often overlooked, even under the best of intentions. DeGenaro argues for a more nuanced engagement with working-class rhetorics, identifying its ability to “confron[t] the elitism that has characterized educational, political, and civic institutions throughout the Western tradition” (6). John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon also note the importance of class “as deeply interwoven with other formative elements of society—race, gender, work, structures of power,” but they acknowledge that class is “the element that is often least explored and most difficult to understand” (12). This article demonstrates how Pecket aligns with stories of exclusion and resistance—of literacies and people that have been at the margins and have sustained themselves. But Pecket also provides us with a context in which to expand community literacy to include people from working-class backgrounds that negotiate and enact literacy beyond traditional educational spaces. The history and model of Pecket allows us to expand notions of disciplinary histories and community literacy by demonstrating how members of a working-class community, with difficulties reading and writing, developed their own grassroots writing, literacy, and educational efforts.

### **An Ethos of Class Collectivity: From Sponsored to Sponsors**

Pecket’s “origin” story is both interesting and complex, since many would locate the group’s beginning in different moments between 1982 and 1992, with multiple informative moments dating back to the 1970s. These dates trace the beginning of Pecket from the small group meetings (emerging from the Horton House magazine group) through its eventual transformation into the user-led and user-directed Pecket Well College. At the heart of these moments was the democratic ideal and hope for “more inclusive education,” especially for people who had limited access to education or were “tackling difficulties with the written word and/or numbers” (Ross 3). These learners fought for the rights to expand their education and, in turn, structured a learning community, with *their* interests at the forefront. On their website, Pecket writes, “most of us are working class adults who missed out on education and have difficulties with reading, writing

and/or numbers. Some of us have improved our skills but others still find these a real struggle. This reality has affected every area of our lives—social, education, financial and our health (physical and emotional)” (Pecket Learning Community).

It would be easy to frame Pecket with a romanticized view of its heroic efforts against educational marginalization; however, the struggles they faced are part of an ongoing public battle between educational access and social realities for many working-class learners. During the 1970s and 1980s, Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal rhetorics and policies that focused on individual responsibility severely limited working-class agency and support. Owen Jones, author of *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*, writes:

At the root of the demonization of working-class people is the legacy of a very British class war. Margaret Thatcher’s assumption of power in 1979 marked the beginning of an all-out assault on the pillars of working-class Britain. Its institutions, like trade unions and council housing, were dismantled; its industries, from manufacturing to mining, were trashed; its communities were, in some cases, shattered, never to recover; and its values, like solidarity and collective aspiration, were swept away in favour of rugged individualism. Stripped of their power and no longer seen as a proud identity, the working class was increasingly sneered at, belittled and scape-goated. (10)

Indeed, during Thatcher’s tenure, a period that historian John Kirk describes as the “‘deconstruction’ of the British working class,” England saw a shift in governmental policies, economic structures, and social attitudes, largely prompted by rhetorics of personal responsibility and self-interest (2).

Two of Pecket’s members, Nick Pollard and Pat Smart, write about the social and economic needs of citizens to voice the effects of such policies in writing and publishing efforts.<sup>3</sup> Tom Woodin also addresses how this political landscape involved adult education in the United Kingdom, noting the “On the Move” campaign that arose from a belief that learners could participate in their own literacy development, and even in the production of educational texts, to increase their sense of educational agency (“Building” 358). During the 1980s, this mission was advanced by organizations that were part of the adult basic education students’ movement and shared connections with Pecketwellians, such as Write First Time and Gatehouse (see Woodin, “Beginner”).<sup>4</sup> Each of these organizations attempted to provide opportunities for all learners, especially those regarded as requiring “remedial education,” to participate in and experience writing workshops

and other social activities focused on literacy such as in public writing or reading events, publications, and writing weekends (Ross 11). Pecket, then, grew out of a moment of conflicting social and economic concerns by working-class people, with the hopes of the community collectively advocating for their own agency as learners and civic participants. The external political and social exigencies compelled these learners, in the face of a radical destruction of working-class institutions, to create a space where working-class individuals would be able to take part in their own education through a profound restructuring of education as a user-led initiative.

For many Pecketwellians, the "biscits" story represents a seminal moment because it illustrates an ideological stand against the authorities; it represents a moment of educational agency. This moment also encapsulates many of their (and the general movement's) values—particularly a belief in taking action through collective organizing, and the idea that everyone deserves a say in their education. Without this moment, Pecket might never have existed. Horton House had been a space where adults with reading and writing difficulties came together in a cooperative learning environment to publish a magazine, *Not Written Off*. The goals of this group were not only about improving literacy but also about providing a public component for adult education. Between 1982 and 1984, six issues were published, each issue crafted, edited, and formatted by the learners themselves with the help of Gillian Frost, their tutor. This collaboration allowed the group to negotiate literacy development as a communal activity and gain confidence in their ability to participate in an educational project without being "written off," as their title suggests.

Although Horton House participants were very positive about these experiences, a changing managerial structure in 1984 led to the pivotal "biscits" moment. Frost explains this incident in Pecket's oral history, *Telling It!*, noting that the students hoped to raise money to purchase a tape recorder to make taking minutes easier:

I got a phone call one day from the education shop worker. . . . He said, what's this, what happened, how come you've allowed out this poster with a spelling mistake in it? It was biscuits, it's very easy to make a spelling mistake with biscuits, and leave out the silent 'U.' *I said it's nothing to do with me actually, if they want me to correct it they know they can come and ask me and I'll do it, but they haven't done [so] and I haven't got authority over them.* I suggested that this was a good way of learning that, as with the fruit and veg stall holders labels in the market, it doesn't have to be spelt perfectly to achieve its

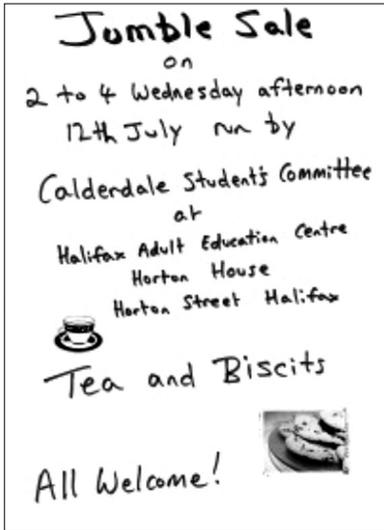


Figure 1. Horton House poster (photo credit: Pecket Learning Community).

objective. This was too mind blowing for adult education. Here was a group in adult education . . . your job is to get it right. *But a tutor didn't have authority over them.* (Ross 20-21; emphasis mine)<sup>5</sup>

As we see from Frost's retelling, the worker at Horton House believed that circulating posters with a misspelled word diminished the center's value and would not sponsor it. Frost and the group, however, felt it was their right to use their own language, not as a mistake but as a rhetorical choice that still functioned adequately for the poster's purpose.

It might seem like a foolish choice for Frost and the learners to reject correcting their mistake, simply for the sake of retaining Horton House's sponsorship. However, as an advocate of democratic and reciprocal learning, in which each student gets a say in

the group's decisions, Frost saw herself as a supporter, not enforcer, of the group's collective efforts. This view also aligned with the ethos and agency the adult learners wanted for themselves. To be sure, this confrontation goes deeper than a simple spelling error. Rather, it points to the intersection

of language standardization, authority, and the marginalization of working-class individuals.

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This was a moment of resistance—a moment where people who had been marginalized for many years in their educational experiences decided to take control

and renegotiate authority to their benefit, a moment when the *unauthorized* authorized themselves. Acting within the political milieu of the time, this self-authorization enabled the learners to negotiate sponsorship and promote their own agendas. To start, the learners enacted a form of "powerful literacies" by "deciding for themselves what is 'really useful literacy' and using it to act . . . on their circumstances to take greater control over them," as Tett, Hamilton, and Crowther describe (4). In doing so, these learners also

enacted power over the standard of spelling (and the ideologies that went along with it) to show their ability to function successfully through their own ways of writing and communicating. For these people—some of whom grew up illiterate or had difficulties with learning and were subsequently marginalized from educational opportunities—standardization was their adversary, not their motivation. Consequently, this moment marked a shift in their collective desire to change the conditions surrounding their authority as learners. Pecketwellian Billy Breeze describes this confrontation: “I said to the Education Centre, yeah, because it’s the way we spell it. You can’t alter it” (Ross 21). Here, Breeze draws attention to a dialect difference between “the way we spell it” of the adult learners and the worker’s standard, which led to a sense of collective agency for the group, as well as an active attempt to change the hierarchical structure of their environment to one that privileged the learners.

This spelling dispute was the fuel that pushed Horton House participants to advocate for a learning environment where they could determine the rules. Moving away from Horton House represents an evolving sense of sponsorship that departs from simply relying on the management. It also moves away from neoliberal ideas that focus on individual attainments and responsibilities. Instead, it frames Pecket’s work within the possibilities of forming a collective in order to create and sustain a form of self-directed and user-led education—a collective self-sponsorship. This was the beginning of building Pecket—a group that defied a system based on social status and previous education and began working outside of an established educational paradigm toward one that respects learners’ choices and rhetorical agency.<sup>6</sup>

At this point, however, Pecket as an official establishment did not exist, but the individuals from Horton House’s magazine group continued to meet and discuss how to improve their educational experiences. Reflecting on this time, Pecketwellian Michelle Baynes describes the group’s dream of redefining education to enable a student-led enterprise and create their own college:

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We talked about our idea and asked if people thought it was feasible to run a college that was “student led”—run by and for people who couldn’t read and write—they said yes! Lots of other people thought it couldn’t be done and some today probably wouldn’t believe we did it but we had already had a taste [of] that freedom and—we wanted that for other people like us. (Ross 24)

What emerged during these meetings (post-“biscuits incident”) was a desire to generate a user-led environment through a collective community rather than an institutional partnership. This model complicates notions of literacy sponsorship, described by Deborah Brandt, because the community both actively denied Horton House’s financial and educational sponsorship and then aggressively pursued a means to develop their own version of sponsorship as a community enterprise. Brandt notes that literacy sponsors “set the terms for access to literacy and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty” (166). Sponsors, she writes, “are a tangible reminder that literacy learning throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance, coercion, or, at minimum, contact with existing trade routes. Sponsors are delivery systems for the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to—and through—individual learners” (167). While Brandt’s examples here rely on the outside sponsor-as-authority, Pecket subverted this power structure and, instead, chose to form their own internal collective and oppositional sponsorship network based on “economies” (read non-neoliberal economies) that were relevant to and supportive of them.<sup>7</sup>

To succeed, then, Pecket had to create a sponsorship network where they were the authority. Importantly, the adult learners of *Not Written Off* recognized there was a growing network that might support (and join) their efforts at gaining full agency of their education. Many of the founding members, including Ann Greenwood, Michael Callaghan, Portia Fincham, Joe Flanagan, Peter Goode, Betty Legg, and Joan Keighley and Gillian Frost, were each involved in other educational opportunities that were looking to push the boundaries of Britain’s educational system.<sup>8</sup> The activist political climate of the time fed into their belief in an education pointed toward civic engagement where all learners were central. It was during this time, too, that they realized Pecket needed a physical presence in the community—a college building to call their own. This desire inspired them to apply for grants from the Yorkshire Arts Association, European Social Funds, the Rural Development Commission, the Lottery Fund, and a New

Directions Programme through the University of Bradford Access Unit. Through these initiatives, members acquired enough money to fund and remodel a building in Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, which would become the physical structure of Pecket. This work was done through what I later refer to as “the humbling of traditional intellectuals”—that is, while using financial, physical, and intellectual resources from multiple supporters, Pecketwellians retained power over their vision.

Pecket’s Archive Project director Pauline Nugent explains, in an interview, how the group accomplished significant work as a result of this self-directed environment. They worked tirelessly to raise funds for modifying the building, accommodating wheelchair needs, and sustaining their unique learning practices. Such direction, Nugent says, led to the physical creation of new and inclusive learning spaces, which provided the “courage and support to help learners begin writing and reading again” in their adult years. And, in effect, many Pecketwellians left with “a sense of confidence” gained from these interactions—confidence that cannot be discounted, as it also transferred in material ways to people traveling for the first time beyond West Yorkshire, managing budgets, having director roles, and sharing their skills (Nugent).

These accomplishments officially manifested in 1992, when Pecket consisted of a user-led learning community housed within a physical building. Over



Figure 2. The original Pecket Well College.



Figure 3. Opening day 1992 (photo credits: Pecket Learning Community).

four hundred people celebrated Pecket Well College's opening as Britain's first residential college for Basic Education (Pecket Well College, *Opening*). Pecketwellian Corrine John evinces both the struggles and joys of what this day represented for many community members. She describes the intense labors that went into establishing Pecket, as well as her shift from seeing literacy as "frightening" to something she could actively take a part in and develop with Pecket's educational model:

For seven long years a fight we've had  
with lots of troubles but now we are glad  
The opening day of Pecket Well  
Is here to stay so ring that bell  
We thank the people who have fought  
for those in need of being taught.

Don't be shy and hide in a cold corner  
Come and make friends its also warmer  
Learning can be hard but please don't run  
At Pecket Well you are taught by fun  
Once you start learning you'll want more  
So please do come and knock on the door

Words that look long and frightening too  
Soon learning comes easy for me and you  
With numbers and letters, reading and writing  
Not knowing where it might be leading  
Extending our skills Thirsting for knowledge.  
you never know we could make it to college.

(Pecket Well College, *Opening*)

For many other members as well, this opening was the defining moment in Pecket's legacy because it established a physical presence in the community, legitimating both a physical structure (the building) and a discursive structure (user-led curriculum) premised on the interests and needs of the learners themselves. Pecket sustained this work from 1992 until about 2009, with thousands of people involved in Pecket's courses as "founder members, participants, Directors, volunteers, paid workers or partner organisations" (Ross 3).<sup>9</sup>

## Learning "The Pecket Way": Democratic Practices and Organic Intellectuals

After establishing the physical college space, Pecket was able to expand their collective approach to learning. "The Pecket Way" became a fluid set of pedagogical tools for learners to enact a democratic vision of participatory learning—a model that has implications both within and beyond traditional educational spaces because it introduces a unique sense of community-based power and agency.

Before discussing "The Pecket Way," however, it should not be forgotten that many of Pecket's members expressed severe difficulties in reading and writing. For this reason, I argue Pecket—through their embodied work of developing their own curriculum/college—can be understood as exemplifying a version of what Antonio Gramsci calls *organic intellectuals*. He writes: "All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals. When one distinguishes between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, one is referring in reality only to the immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals" (9). Indeed, Gramsci notes how intellectuals are often categorized through their schooling and the vertical nature of moving up the grade scale; this represents the stratifying nature of traditional education and a version of sponsorship that relies on an authoritative institution and person (or group). However, as Gramsci notes, organic intellectuals materialize not in the "social function" of what jobs people do, but rather through their participation with the masses, through important collective organizational efforts to meet their real life needs (9). In effect, the foundation of organic intellectual work comes from groups, like Pecket, that actively engage with the needs of a community and produce structural change, like a residential college, though perhaps not the complete economic change Gramsci might have ultimately sought.

Gramsci's discussion of traditional and organic intellectuals provides a valuable framework for understanding Pecket's impact. The term *organic intellectuals* represents the belief that all people have meaningful experiences, which could inform others and contribute to the organization's collective effort. Pecketwellian Joe Flannagan writes:

The first thing people want to know is "who's in charge," but we have to make it clear, we all are. I'm responsible for what I'm doing. The help is there if I

need it. We are not here as students or tutors. We are all here to work together and to learn from each other. Those labels have gone out the door. (Pecket Well College, "Forging" 229)

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They were organic intellectuals who saw the affordances of social organizing in order to build a collective educational structure that would benefit adults who had been unjustly located in a stratum of society based on their working-class identity and educational difficulties.

For the remainder of this section, I draw on Gramsci's work to articulate three strategies that were central to Pecket's success: 1) recognizing organic intellectuals; 2) humbling traditional intellectuals; and 3) building a new common sense curriculum.

### ***Recognizing Organic Intellectuals***

Most Pecketwellians were working from severely disadvantaged economic conditions, as well as challenged educational and personal backgrounds. But Pecket operated under "a belief that everyone had skills" (Ross 47), which meant the courses were most often led and directed by individuals who were working on their writing and reading. Therefore, they were able to take the idea of organic intellectuals and to organize and build on that through their peer learning strategies, to dispel the idea that only certain people have the expertise to teach. In effect, the awareness and belief in their own abilities allowed Pecket to operate on an asset-based model of learning. This ideal was represented in the structure, naming, and daily activities of the organization.

One way Pecket distributed learning instruction was through the use of tools aimed at inclusion. Because many learners had different needs, Pecketwellians were devoted to discovering ways of enabling productive learning environments. One such tool was a "writing hand" or a scribe that volunteered to write down the words of someone who may not have been

able to write or wanted someone else to assist in this process (Ross 49). A writing hand was not meant to standardize or diminish the person speaking but rather to provide a method for support that allowed everyone a chance to get their speaking into writing. The role of a writing hand required a professional and caring relationship with the learner, formed out of mutual respect. As described by Pauline Nugent, the writing hand was important in helping learners find their own confidence in their education: "there was a very acute awareness of how people's confidence had been knocked down by educational institutions and other life experiences. The Pecket Way of working was about not making those situations worse" (qtd. in Ross 50). Here, the writing hand was a rhetorical approach—a response to the needs of the learners, in order to allow everyone to participate in learning, especially by recognizing that learning and rhetorical work can happen through variations of orality, writing, and collaboration.

Pecket also used other teaching techniques to encourage each learner to interact and make meaning. "Journey sticks," for instance, were used as a physical reminder for learners when they went on group walks (Ross 50). Members could pick up a stick (or other objects), bring them back to the building, and use them for memory aides when sharing their stories. For instance, members would attach objects to their stick that represented key moments along the way. The goal was to use the objects as a physical reminder of their embodied learning experience and to encourage personal reflection and emotions in their own learning development—something few Pecketwellians ever experienced. That is, Pecketwellians often tried to make learning more tangible through kinesthetic activities, such as creating posters, magazines, quilts, and banners, which allowed learners to express ideas with multiple materials and moved beyond a solely text-based method of learning.

Pecket also believed in the benefits of Life Stories, where learners would narrate their intellectual and personal histories. These written productions functioned as a form of testimony of working-class experience and education, representing, for many, the first time they were ever asked to talk about "what mattered to them" (Nugent). Indeed, Life Stories were the first opportunity in their educational history that gave Pecketwellians a chance describe their difficulties in a safe environment and contribute to something on their own, showing that their life experiences mattered. Eventually, Life Stories became a way for Pecket to publish and circulate their writing as a

collaborative endeavor and represented the first significant written work many of these learners had ever accomplished in their life (Pecket Learning Community, “Journeysticks”). The pedagogical aim was to enable people to discuss and reflect on their experiences and learn from each other. Such methods emphasized that everybody is an active participant, an organic intellectual, as they worked together as cocreators of knowledge.

Notably, these learning practices often transformed lives in both material and ideological ways, prompting opportunities for Pecketwellians that were not possible before. One member, Florence Agbah, became associated with Pecket after she immigrated to Britain from Ghana. At Pecket, Agbah took classes where she worked with “writing hands” and published two life histories about family struggles as well as her working life as an immigrant janitor who could not read, write, or speak much British English. Agbah’s Life Stories, *The Survivor* and *Ways of Learning*, detail moments of personal trauma, social stigma, financial constraints, and shifting geographic locations as she describes how such factors affected her educational development. In an interview, Agbah explains how difficult daily life was for her since she was unable to read or write. She discusses her inability to use a “hole in the wall” (ATM machine) without these skills (Agbah). While Agbah is the first to admit that her reading and writing did not always progress as quickly as she would like, her experiences reflect the rhetorical literacy skills she acquired throughout her years at Pecket. For example, the process of collaboratively talking about, creating, revising, and publishing these stories enabled her to share her testimony with a broader group of people. These developing communication skills spurred material results (the production of her work in two publications and a job) as well as an ideological shift in her own confidence, ability, and agency.

Eventually, Agbah became a director at Pecket. She was also their first paid outreach worker because she understood the needs of adult learners. She described the importance of this position:

My job was working with people like myself. Finding them and bringing them to Pecket to work on their reading and writing. It wasn’t easy. . . . It is frightening to be going somewhere to work on your reading and writing because you always think you are the only one. . . . I was treated equally—sometimes I forgot I couldn’t read and write! I know what other participants feel like—I can relate to them. But if you are someone who has had a good education you can’t do that. (qtd. in Ross 44)

In this way, Agbah's story represents how Pecket implicitly embodies organic intellectual work, by privileging Agbah's knowledge and ability to do outreach over that of a traditionally educated person. By paying her to do this work, Pecket illustrates a commitment to knowledges formed from life experiences and the recognition of intelligence beyond the social function of individuals.

### ***Humbling Traditional Intellectuals***

Since its emergence, Pecket has demonstrated a commitment to valuing all learners and building from their abilities to make the organization run effectively. While working to improve their own reading and writing, members maintained agency over decisions throughout the process of organizing Pecket's learning community. Pecketwellians designed the board of directors so that community members outnumbered traditional intellectuals. As stated in their constitution: "a majority of directors must have reading and writing difficulties themselves and other directors should be people who suppor[t] our aims and ways of working" (Ross 32).

Significant, here, is how forcefully Pecketwellians advocated for the dismantling of the hierarchy of traditional expertise. This does not mean that professional workers or scholars were not welcome. In fact, Pecket had members from universities that were involved in various ways. Rather, it represents a valuing of Pecket's agency. As one member expressed, even when there were traditional intellectuals around, "You didn't call them tutors, you called them on a first name basis and if they didn't like it they had to just lump it you know. [If] Anyone said I'm a tutor, ah—no, not going to call you tutor. We didn't want to be called students because we wasn't students, we was learners. So they were workers and learners—that was the language" (qtd. in Ross 47). Here, the change in discourse from *tutor* to *worker* and from *students* to *learners* signifies a deeper ideological valuing of all participants.

Instead of treating one person as the standard of knowledge, Pecket actively worked toward emphasizing every person's ability to share different knowledge and skills—a method that was put to test many times throughout its tenure. For instance, while looking into a charitable status, Pecket hired John Coles, later deemed "Uncle John," because the group needed someone to "put gobbledygook legal language into everyday language so that those of [us] who were going to be a director of Pecket would under-

stand what were required of [them], what [they] had to do by law” (qtd. in Ross 30). Here, Pecketwellians asked the legal professional or “expert” to assist them in taking an active part in understanding all aspects of the organization. In this way, there was a distinct attempt to negotiate authority so their desires would not be co-opted; said another way, although Pecket had multiple financial, educational, and professional sponsors, the goal

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was always for Pecket to maintain agency. Here again, Gramsci might usefully articulate the importance of such a strategy. Gramsci writes, “One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and conquer

‘ideologically’ the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more the group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals” (10). In this way, Gramsci describes how groups can better attain a dominant position by developing their own organic intellectuals and using that base as a means to convert “traditional intellectuals” to their cause. Such seems to be the case with Pecket.

Finally, Mary Hamilton, Pauline Nugent, and Nick Pollard reference the choice of using the term *college* in order to challenge traditional perspectives of learning. They note Pecketwellians saying that Pecket is “not an ordinary college,” and that learning “could take a lifetime,” because everyone learns at different paces, which is why Pecket was about “every participant . . . having a say in their own learning” (Hamilton, Nugent, and Pollard 17). In effect, Pecketwellians were a part of organizing and negotiating their own methods of support, evincing the ability of working-class individuals to mobilize and create spaces of agency for their own learning. Therefore, we can see how Pecket adamantly pursued an expansive notion of *intellectuals*, even naming their learning community Pecket Well College, flipping the expectations associated with traditional educational structures.

Within this structure of highlighting organic intellectuals and humbling the power of traditional intellectuals, Pecket demonstrates a new model for collective self-sponsorship in which the community members have an expanded sense of agency. Each of these examples shows how

Pecketwellians successfully navigated multiple positions in the growth and development of Pecket. Even more, these moments represent numerous rhetorical tactics Pecketwellians used in order to maintain their own sense of sponsorship. To be sure, Pecket did receive assistance from traditional intellectual and institutional sources of funding, but they did so while staying true to Pecket's values and structure. In fact, Pecket represents a model of partnership work that relied on the agency, organizing efforts, and rhetorically savvy skills of the learners themselves.

### ***Building a New Common Sense Curriculum***

Ultimately, Gramsci saw the need to reframe "common sense" values in working-class terms against hegemonic structures (199), and Pecket did this. Similar to his belief that individuals do not need to have the social role of an intellectual to *be* an intellectual, Gramsci's idea of common sense proposes a critique of hegemonic ruling structures and advocates a dismantling of the status quo to establish a new "common sense." This idea of a new "common sense" applies to Pecketwellians' need to separate themselves from the standard educational structures and create their own curriculum. It is this organizing piece, referenced by Gramsci as the organic intellectuals who come together to counter hegemonic notions of education and intellectualism, which separates Pecket from most traditional learning models during this time in the United Kingdom as well as the United States.

For Pecket, this came in the model of residential education courses, or a curriculum that emerged from the community. Pecket became part of a network of residential experiences, where learners would stay at the college overnight or for multiple-day workshops as part of an immersive learning experience. In Pecket's history, they have participated and organized such residential events as "Sharing Dreams," "One World to Share," and "As We See Ourselves." These workshops were geared toward participant engagement with themes around identity, community, and understanding themselves in relation to the world around them. "Sharing Dreams," for instance, was a weekend residential course in 1987 at Northern College in Barnsley. During this time, the participants co-facilitated workshops on such diverse topics as "photography, poetry, life stories, what matters to you, art, sing out, Handicapped Awareness, Black writers, Young Writers, Women's writer groups" (Pecket Well College, *Sharing*). Subsequently, these workshops culminated in a publication entitled *Sharing Dreams*, which

was then sold for £3 to help with fund-raising efforts. Thus, the workshop's effects extended beyond the weekend, as the community publication gave Pecketwellians material to circulate and continue discussions about the importance of adult education. In this way, residential education offered sites of learning that moved beyond traditional educational spaces and into community spaces and activities; this model emerged from a sense of democratic sensibility that all participants can contribute to the learning at hand, thereby actively shaping the cultural conditions around them.

These attempts to support a new “common sense,” a new curriculum, expanded as Pecket grew. Over time, local newspapers, the BBC, and even international organizations recognized Pecket's success as a new learning structure and activist organization for basic education. One of the main examples of Pecket's active intervention in the conservative educational system came in 1990, when Pecketwellians Corrine John and Peter Goode were invited to Holland for a literacy conference. Hosted by the Bossche School voor Volwassenen, this conference brought together an international network of adult learners to discuss their experiences and highlight the ways adult learners across the world were breaking down barriers in their communities. This conference solidified Pecket's advocacy for adult basic education and represented an official moment where Pecket was not in a marginalized position but was a valid and legitimate group to be honored and invited to share their learning techniques. In essence, this was a moment where traditional intellectuals realized that organic intellectuals like Pecketwellians were doing valuable work. To be sure, Pecketwellians already saw themselves as legitimate; this conference, however, represented a changing paradigm in international adult basic literacy views where traditionally defined intellectuals did as well.

As a result of their conference visit, Paulo Freire endorsed Pecket's work in a documentary called *Liberating Literacy*. And it is easy to see why, since Pecket's model highlighted the connection between democracy and liberation, what Freire calls, “that specifically human act of intervening in the world” (99). Freire's view of education is about changing a society—not only through our thinking but also through the material realities and challenges faced each day—to understand that economics and rights and access to education and health care or employment are all a part of the socially constructed world we live in. Moreover, Freire expresses the ability for education to have “a ‘directive’ vocation,” which “addresses itself to dreams,

ideals, utopias, objectives, to what [he has called] the 'political' nature of education" (100). Education, therefore, embodies not only material constraints and challenges but also the immense possibilities afforded through human interaction. Pecket adhered to a similar vision of activism focused on improving educational opportunities for adult learners—significant for learning development, occupational skill improvement, and community literacy growth—and used those same skills to engage in daily civic participation. Pecket was equally about creating a self-sponsored community of learners that could (and did) experience personal and political change as part of this supportive educational environment.

Pecketwellian Corrine John explains the personal significance of Pecket on her life as well as the material changes it prompted:

Oh [my life] changed a lot. I ended up getting a job after 12 years out of work. I ended up passing me driving test. And I got certificates for IT work. Pecket opened the door for me and it just kept opening, just kept moving to doors that opened. . . .When you went to Pecket, we were all one. We were all the same . . . . There was always something that someone else could help me [with]. And we got the answer in the end. We didn't have anybody over you. You decided what you wanted to learn. (John)

Here, John notes just a few of the defining factors of Pecket's organizational structure and how this community model was central in providing her with confidence, a support structure for her learning, and ultimately a renewed sense of her learning abilities. First, it was built around a democratic view that represented the interests of all learners, regardless of their educational experiences or personal identity. Next, Pecket's solidarity and sense of collective ownership created a base for seeing literacy as a collaborative and reciprocal learning endeavor, as well as rhetorically contingent upon what the community wanted to accomplish. And, finally, each person who came to Pecket was met with the right that all people can and deserve to learn. Pecket, as a community of learners, helped John push past the stigma of literacy difficulties and enabled her to get a job and a license, become a peer-learner and leader within Pecket's workshops, and attend an international literacy conference as an invited guest. Similar to John's explanation of what Pecket provided for her, one founding member described Pecket: "It's meant the privilege of witnessing and of experiencing myself the transformation, and for me Pecket was a little utopia, it was how society should be. It was

how people should relate to each other. It was power used together and for something, rather than power used over above and against” (qtd. in Ross 94).

### **Tentative Implications for Working-Class Literacies and Alternative Histories**

I want to reflect on Susan Kates’s claim that “we still know very little about the ways in which individuals who were pushed to the margins of our educational system . . . learned to read and write” (500). Pecket’s story provides a version of such a history, focusing on working-class British

**And I would argue that by exploring how Pecket generated a new vision of agency and organic intellectuals, the work of these writers reorients what histories we include in our field, as well as provides an expanded sense of how we understand community literacy efforts within working-class communities.**

adult learners who were, indeed, consistently “pushed to the margins” because of their class status and educational experiences. And I would argue that by exploring how Pecket generated a new vision of agency and organic intellectuals, the work of these writers reorients what histories we include in our field, as well as provides an

expanded sense of how we understand community literacy efforts within working-class communities. Indeed, through Pecket, we see valuable examples of how working-class communities develop literate skills in highly rhetorical ways—by creating a unique and democratic model of education, by recognizing themselves as organic intellectuals, humbling the authority traditional intellectuals had over their organization, and by building a curriculum for themselves.

Pecket also expands our sense of community literacy practices. That is, it provides an important self-generated example of literacy practices of non-experts creating an alternative educational space with new criteria for literacy and education that are often not recognized in our scholarship: organizational, vernacular, and pedagogical literacies.

- We can see *organizational literacy* in the examples where members consistently organized as a group in order to learn how to build and manage their own college. Here, they were able to establish ways to fund-raise, provide outreach, and ultimately develop from a small magazine group into a residential college under their own leadership.

- We can see *vernacular literacies* represented from the earliest moments of the “biscits incident,” where members advocated for writing and language that was representative of their dialects and experiences, even if that went against standardized language rules. On a larger scale, though, vernacular literacies are represented through Pecket’s collaborative publishing of “Life Stories,” which focus on each writer’s personal testimony. This work was also expanded through collaborative publications created after residential sessions. Each of these publications focused on celebrating the language of the learners in their own right and often provided an outlet to discuss important social and political issues.
- Finally, we can see Pecket’s *pedagogical literacies* developed through years of creating their own curriculum and teaching “The Pecket Way” in residential courses through the use of learning tools such as journey sticks, writing hands, and other collaborative techniques that enable learners to engage in knowledge production in multiple ways.

To be sure, these examples of organizational, vernacular, and pedagogical literacies create an expansive understanding of literacy that might even gain criticism as being sweeping statements about the term. My goal, however, is not to generalize literacy to mean everything, but rather to use these categories as examples for how we might change *where* we look when we think about literacy, *how* we look for examples, and *who*

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we include in literacy discussions. If we understand Pecket in this way, we see a community located at the margins, which challenges traditional models of agency that often rely on university sponsorship and authority, and redefines who can be intellectuals by embodying organic intellectuals themselves. This provides an expanded sense of agency that we don’t often see in moments of community partnership, where the community is in charge and has the ability to negotiate their wants, needs, values, and skills.

In doing so, Pecket also demonstrates a working model of how com-

munities can create new strategic spaces that interrupt our usual stories about community partnerships. While many scholars have already troubled the idea of partnership work, arguing that we need approaches that focus on community needs rather than university interests, none of these models emerged organically from the community.<sup>10</sup> Often we “trouble” university-directed efforts—humbling our goals but not our intellectual dominance. From our current-day disciplinary viewpoint, Pecket’s model reminds us of

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the importance of community-generated values and curriculum, meaning scholarly interests taking a backseat to community interests and desires; it demands that the community hold the power. Pecket’s model emerges from the learners themselves. With

Pecket, we see how communities can and do organically create their own model of collective self-sponsored learning, as well as some challenges they face along the way. A strong belief in the agency of a collective organization gave Pecket power to dictate what they want, thereby flipping the model of interaction to fit their needs. At the heart of the “biscuits incident” was an understanding that working-class adult learners have rhetorical agency that does not have to adhere to standardized or traditional notions or expectations with education. In community literacy work, we can continue to expand our understanding of literacy by highlighting people, literacies, and the knowledges that circulate within communities but are continually pushed aside—particularly those of the working class. Rather than thinking of this as a hierarchy of knowledge, a community organization model such as Pecket shows us how they reframed legal, tutoring, and funding expertise (among other things) in order to be of use *to* the community. This moves beyond seeing communities as lacking, as Pecket shows what is possible with an entire population of learners who were systematically described in negative ways based on their educational abilities and socioeconomic status, and rather seeks to reframe or negotiate a model that pulls from all the available means of collaborative enterprises.

Many times, we might see ourselves as bringing in a curriculum, but Pecket built their own. We might see ourselves as being leaders, but Pecket directed themselves. And we might see ourselves as dispelling hierarchies of education, but Pecket already built a college to do that. In effect, to promote

more sustainable environments, it might first take a shift in what histories we explore and how we understand our role within the community in relation to the agency that they have already created.

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## **Notes**

1. The use of *Pecket* illustrates how members choose to name and represent themselves as a collective.
2. Most members dislike the term *literacy* because they were often framed negatively as being *illiterate*, as I indicate here. However, I use these terms in order to describe the affordances of the group's work and their capabilities, and to show how Pecket breaks this binary of il/literacy.
3. Examples of this writing are represented through the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP). See Woodin, "Beginner"; "Building."
4. *Pecketwellian* is a term used to signal someone who has taken part in the Pecket Well community.
5. Spelling choices made by Pecketwellians are kept throughout this article.
6. This tension with language was also represented in US college education policies and the struggle to not overturn the Students' Rights to Their Own Language, a resolution that encouraged teachers to seek to understand linguistic disparities and to make these differences a useful part of learning, rather than a means of deficit or exclusion.
7. In Duffy et al.'s *Literacy, Economy, and Power: Writing and Research after Literacy in American Lives*, scholars have complicated Brandt's work to explore "how the concept of sponsorship [has] been appropriated and used" (3). For example, Eli Goldblatt and David Jolliffe address the affordances and limitations of such work, arguing that sponsorship is often, especially in community

literacy work, a risky endeavor. To truly engage in the “gains” of sponsorship, they argue that academic institutions must undergo structural and ideological transformations that challenge hierarchies of authority and agency, as well as broaden the mission and values of universities to welcome in projects and people that might challenge the traditional structure. This work touches on the need for universities to undergo ideological shifts, but Pecket pushes on these examples, thinking about sponsorship that is self-directed by the community.

8. See Ross for additional Pecket members.

9. Although the physical structure of Pecket Well College was sold in 2009, the money from the building went on to preserve the legacy and community of Pecket through an oral history and archival project that continued through 2014.

10. Since the *public turn*, scholars have written about the intersections between university and community structures through community engagement practices that lead us to question the sustainability of such projects and whose interests might be served (Deans, Roswell, and Wurr; Mathieu; Restaino and Cella). These scholars have also productively questioned how we can support community literacy efforts by recognizing literacies from various communities (Flower; Goldblatt; Parks). The structure and effects of these examples vary, but many community engagement practices begin from a connection with universities and are sustained through such efforts. For some, this comes in the form of a negotiation of tactical approaches aimed at localized projects (Mathieu), while others rely on large-scale development efforts from the university, such as the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh (Flower) and Tree House Books (Goldblatt). Recently, Paul Feigenbaum has advocated that a valuable approach to community partnership work is by actually forming nonprofits with the community. These insightful projects show us multiple models for conceptualizing community work, but these projects provide a vision of literacy and sponsorship that relies on institutional support more so than self-directed work like Pecket’s.

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