

# Inception to Implementation: Feminist Community Engagement via Service-Learning

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*This article offers both a theoretical underpinning and a case study of practice as exhibits of a more democratic community engagement praxis for rhetoric and composition educators.*

*The case study featured in the article suggests re-positioning the importance of collaborative and democratic engagement as the cornerstone of successful community engagement work. While the case is situated in technical and professional communication, it affords an interdisciplinary representation of community engagement.*

*Keywords: community-campus partnerships, democratic engagement, feminist community engagement*

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This article<sup>1</sup> offers a model of feminist community engagement that suggests a reorientation of towards the implementation of service-learning in university-level writing courses. Heeding recent calls in community engagement literature, this article frames community engagement as a means of engaging *with* communities, rather than *for*

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communities; alongside this theoretical shift, teachers and communities need models of successful feminist community engagement. While this article features a case contextualized by technical and professional communication, the findings are generalizable to courses taught in college writing, broadly construed. This model is intended for writing programs and faculty, such that they may engage with their communities to affect net benefits for community partners, students, and faculty.

## **SITUATING THE WORK**

Before discussing the case, I correlate feminist community engagement praxis with college writing and communication courses as a method of democratizing course design. The case, a study in collaborative course design and technical documentation development, suggests that while this method may be effective in many ways, it affords great opportunity for further development. The roots of this approach can be tied to the work done by Holmes and presented in *Reflections* in 2011.

At the outset I throw by the wayside predominant charity models of service-learning that reinforce the hegemony of the university within the wider community (Stewart and Webster, 2011; Mitchell, 2008). Instead, this case builds upon a justice-oriented approach to community engagement (Iverson and James, 2014), one that seeks to address the causes of inequality and injustice instead of offering temporary reprieve for the results of systemic societal injustice.

To help articulate the definitional aspects of service-learning and community engagement throughout this piece, I suggest thinking of community engagement as the “methodology” that undergirds the implementation of service-learning as a pedagogical “method.” Community engagement has broader epistemological commitments than service-learning and falls more in line with the term civic engagement, which is increasingly represented in both community engagement and writing studies literatures.

The course used in this case was an upper-division technical and professional communication course delivered to undergraduates in the Southeastern United States. Because the case discussed in this

article is based on the experience of co-constructing and co-teaching a technical and professional writing course, it is contextualized largely with literature from technical and professional communication and community engagement.

## OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

In 2001, Nora Bacon published a prescient observation in *Reflections*, suggesting that, among other, expected shifts in service-learning scholarship and research, readers should be attuned to the increasing importance of community perceptions and impact. In a 2004 *Reflections* special issue on service-learning and professional communication, Blake Scott noted three recurring themes in his meta-analysis; one of these was the significance of reciprocal, sustained partnerships. This article is situated not only by these two observations but also the heavily theorized turn towards the democratization of community engagement.

In technical communication specifically, community engagement via service-learning clearly complements pedagogy (Crabtree and Sapp, 2002). Community engagement acts as a buffer for pre-professionals. In the 2004 *TCQ* special issue on civic engagement, Ornatowski and Bekins (2004) articulate this harkening to technical and professional communication's historical foundations. The theoretical frameworks presented in the 2004 issue helped solidify civic engagement and its manifestation as community engagement and service-learning, in technical and professional communication. The approach has only gained traction since then; it is also alluded to in the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing's recent CFP for the 2016 conference focusing on citizenship and advocacy. The vitality of service-learning and democratic engagement is clear in this document. The importance of these positions related to ethics and critical praxis are validated in work by Hopton (2013) and manifested in textbooks for undergraduates such as the one by Bowdon and Scott (2003).

Yet even before *Technical Communication Quarterly's* special issue in 2004, Robert McEachern (2001) argued service-learning problematizes the technical communication classroom in unexpected ways. McEachern's article noted the struggles nonprofits face when working with students. Like Matthews & Zimmerman (1999)

before him, McEachern's article greatly informed the space in which service-learning evolved in technical and professional communication programs.

McEachern offered a representation of "nonprofit organizations" as objects of study, objects for use. Instead of being intrinsically valuable and independently meaningful, these spaces were granted meaning through technical and professional communication's assessment of them, so that scholars and practitioners can pre-empt the "problems" they "will encounter in their projects." Here McEachern re-focused on academic frustrations, constructing a narrative of service *for* and not one of learning *with*, much as Dubinsky did in the introduction to *Reflections* 2004 special issue on service-learning in professional communication. The remainder of this section suggests that championing a new narrative, one of working *with* rather than *for*, is fundamental to embracing feminist community engagement theories. This approach promises the possibility of more just, honest, democratic praxis.

The utility of community engagement projects within technical and professional communication relies on the premise that certain projects necessitate or indicate, as a wise option, practice within the community (Dubinsky, 2004; Crabtree & Sapp, 2002; Eble & Gaillet, 2004; Cargile Cook, 2014). Recent scholarship in feminist community engagement more specifically (Iverson and James, 2014; Costa and Leong, 2012) suggests that novel, critical approaches are necessary to enhance existing community engagement initiatives; this is, for them, true across disciplines. The work of the past decade, they argue, still fails to offer the critical lens that cracks open the greatest potential in community engagement. In particular, these scholars task practitioners and researchers to question the "best practices" for service-learning, as a classroom application of community engagement. Such calls transcend disciplinary boundaries; in this way, community engagement praxis, a marriage of theory and practice, provides a multidisciplinary space to investigate what returns are provided to communities that host institutions of higher education.

In 2009, Stoecker et al. published *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning*. The book was released as the

largest (at the time) assessment of “unheard voices” of community partners. Bolstered by a number of articles appearing shortly before and after in the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (e.g. Curwood et al., 2011; Stanton, 2000; Sandy & Holland, 2006), as well as disciplinary specific journals (e.g. Blouin and Perry, 2009), it grew increasingly apparent that service-learning scholarship’s attendance to innovation in meeting community needs, occurred by examining them *in disciplinary situ*, with some cases offering generalizable heuristics.

Yet, recent scholarship in technical and professional communication related to service-learning focuses on disciplinary representation (Cargile Cook, 2014) or adaptation to online environments (e. g. Bourelle, 2014). Little theoretical work has been done to push service-learning in technical and professional communication courses beyond the framework developed in the early 2000’s. Yet when community “needs” are determined by faculty and student interests, the work of service-learning is more learning-oriented than community-oriented. While community partners are engaged participants in these representations of service-learning and community engagement, they are not, by these more recent critical examinations, true “partners.” Feminist community engagement challenges us to do better work *with* the communities with which we learn and serve.

Paralleling discipline specific literature focusing on community engagement and service-learning are feminist community engagement praxis models (Iverson and James, 2014; Costa and Leong, 2012; hooks, 1994). These models apply a variety of critical lenses in efforts to heighten awareness, embrace diversity, and encourage inclusion of traditionally underrepresented voices. Costa and Leong (2012) suggest that such an approach requires we attend to the “epistemologies that underlie civic engagement discourses and projects as well as the pedagogical processes by which they are instantiated.” These discourses are imbued with power and embodied in pedagogy. It is in these narratives that this present project finds greatest affinity. Specifically, the case I describe in this article troubles notions of what it means to democratically and reciprocally partner with a nonprofit organization through pedagogy.

This project rests on the underlying warrants of feminist community engagement praxis. Namely: alignment of civic engagement with activism (Bisignani, 2014); Fraser's (2001) framework for social justice based upon recognition, redistribution, and representation; the necessity for humility in successful reciprocity (Noel, 2014). And finally, a complex relationship with the term "community," which remains relatively nebulous in both in practice and in press (Iverson and James, 2014).

With these tenets in mind, the notion of community engagement, as achieved via service-learning, is problematized by the very nature of the act of engagement. Engaging with community recognizes difference *and* reinforces it. The notion that service-learning "bridges" the divide between campus and community dictates that a divide exists and implicitly suggests that students are not members of these communities.

As narrators of our own strategic pedagogy, technical communication scholars can recognize the innate privilege they possess in dictating partnerships with community. Service-learning is a traditionally "top down" model that conveys power through invitation to participate (Hartley et al., 2009; Butin, 2010). Traditional service-learning models create an obvious power differential: campuses will find positions for their students; nonprofits and government organizations, on the other hand, will have needs met by students only if the course objectives dictate. Literature on service-learning often reinforces and reiterates the dominant account of the university as *instigator* and *investigator* of service-learning (Scott, 2004; Bekins and Ornatowski, 2004; McEachern, 2001; Turnely, 2004).

In the interest of examining the traditional model and working to implement some version of feminist community engagement, the case discussed below describes a course built "from scratch." From inception to implementation, my partner Allison, and I, worked together to construct the course while observing the ways in which we worked together. We worked to test our own ability to shift the university-dominated narratives of service-learning.

## BACKGROUND

In April 2014, Allison, the executive director of a youth-focused nonprofit, and I were awarded funds to co-construct an upper division proposal writing course for the coming Fall semester. During the course development process, we examined how feminist community engagement could be enacted, pushing the boundaries of course development and design. Allison and I were curious: Could we build, collaboratively, a course from the ground up? Would this be a model of successful feminist community engagement? Could we reframe our (academically rigorous) courses to ensure the needs of our community are instantiated in our course development, delivery, outcomes, publications, and professional growth?

With these questions in mind, our goal was to develop a collaborative course between my institutional home and LE, a local, South Florida nonprofit run by Allison. LE serves youth ages 5-17 with a variety of athletic, musical, and academic support outside of the school system. As the organization continued to evolve after receiving its 501(c)3 designation, Allison, LE's Executive Director, was looking for ways to support the successes of the youth-based programming. Funding from the University of South Florida's Office of Community Engagement and Partnerships gave us the opportunity to build a new proposal writing course from the ground up, *together*. Nationally, courses like these are offered across disciplines; they are frequently delivered with a community-engaged component.

Yet the novelty of this approach is the philosophy that service-learning courses can be most effective when co-constructed, with collaborative and invested partners. Allison and I investigated what this looks like in practice. Our work exhibits how service-learning practices in writing and communication courses can embrace feminist community engagement theories to build honest, just, democratic praxis. We worked to break the perpetuation of power differentials in an environment that traditionally defines the campus as better equipped than its community. These deficit narratives continue to be perpetuated in a tenuous pedagogical space; legitimization efforts plague service-learning pedagogy, and it is fraught with concerns about academic rigor (Abes, Jackson, and Jones, 2002). Now more

than ever, feminist community engagement practices can enhance and re-shape the top-down models of service-learning.

The hope was to build a model to frame and re-orient service-learning initiatives collaboratively during the summer of 2014, as opposed to something that occurs as an addendum to syllabi. My goal was to collaborate with Allison as a co-instructor to ensure that the course met both LE's expectations and needs. This model, when translated across disciplinary, geographical, and spatial boundaries, is a novel heuristic for faculty and partners.

The reasons we embraced this approach and proposed the project were twofold: First, we were deeply invested in examining the discourse of university representatives as they worked to build relationships off campus. Second, as a practitioner, I also believed such an approach should be enacted. The result was a collaborative experimentation with new practice, grounded in a criticalist approach to community engagement.

Allison and I went about the business of developing and deploying our proposal writing course. The themes shared here were gleaned from our observations related to how the course evolved over the summer months, transitioned into implementation, and concluded as we reflected on outcomes. We also developed and deployed a survey for students three times in the semester. These anonymous surveys were brief and asked questions regarding students' perceptions of their relationship with Allison and myself, as well as their understanding of their role in the course. Finally, we collected reflection documents throughout the semester.

I do not suggest that these results are comprehensive nor would I claim that the findings have been triangulated to provide a firm understanding of how co-construction takes place. Instead, I offer the highlights of the project and suggest its allegiance with cutting edge praxis in service-learning and community engagement. These pedagogies and efforts are, I suggest, a compelling method to promote, orient, and enact justice in our communities.

## RECURRENT THEMES

The year-long engagement regarding this specific course provided four primary “take-aways,” or themes, relevant to reconceptualizing community engagement with a feminist orientation. I present these as an autoethnography for the purposes of clarity and brevity, and because this best represents the enactment of this work.

First, *traditional modes of communication did not lead to the partnership originally envisioned*. How we are connected to partners, even before we formalize a partnership, speaks volumes to the ways in which we are able to work with them. For scholars working actively with nonprofit partners, adopting this attitude/disposition may seem obvious. I solicited information from my campus’s office of engagement, requesting partners for the project but was largely stymied in my early search. I did not learn about LE and Allison’s needs until I sent notification to the faculty in my department asking them to pitch the course to their upper division students. A colleague replied, and it was then that I learned about LE and Allison’s need. In fact, the strategic communications and partnership building language presently advocated by best practices in engagement heuristics brought me only parties interested in students already trained and willing to write a proposal, rather than students learning about seeking funding opportunities and developing proposals. I needed a partner willing to build the course to best fit their organization’s needs, rather than a partner who would simply host students for service hours. Allison and I needed to ensure the course still provided a structured learning environment for students. Many potential partners were taken aback by this request; they have been trained by universities to expect a specific type of partnership.

In our early communications, Allison exhibited a willingness to work with me, recognized tight deadlines, and embraced the challenge of difficult conversations about our power dynamic. These initial conversations—over the phone, via email, and in person—laid the foundation for our collaborative work. Reflecting on these communications in comparison with my previous more “directive” service-learning projects, highlighted how fragile a space early communications can be for new partners. Presenting opportunities to one and other, rather than a faculty member or instructor offering

an opportunity to a community partner, is a fundamental component of this co-construction approach. Therefore, careful use of language and a nuanced mindset regarding this design are important.

Second, *assets are relative*. Instructors and researchers committed to healthy community engagement praxis should already be aware that an asset-based approach, which I suggest is grounded in humility, is increasingly vital to successful community engagement work (Noel, 2014). My positionality in this project was nebulous. In reality, I was someone unsure of the local needs, communities, and nonprofits. My assets were a classroom and at least ten upper division technical writing majors. This is what I was able to offer, along with my professional experience in writing proposals.

What I had to offer was not appealing to many of the larger nonprofits in South Florida, especially those with established resource development programs. However, my assets were appealing to LE, a grassroots nonprofit that had, at that point, not pursued grant or foundation funding.

Established in 2011, LE “is committed to saving 1,000 youth a week through various sporting, artistic and academic programs.” As a relatively new organization, LE was sustained by the generous support of volunteers and is staffed by one full-time individual, Allison. When we began our communication in April of 2014, her needs were explicit: skilled writers to help build a fiscal base for programming via proposal writing. Indeed, prior to our first communications, Allison had already developed a handbook to guide interested students willing to serve as proposal writers for her organization. Therefore, LE’s infrastructure for effective collaboration was already present *prior* to the request for partnership. Moreover, LE has a vibrant, committed volunteer base. Individuals were willing to act on behalf of Allison to ensure she was not overwhelmed by the project, in addition to her full-time responsibilities. Before beginning our formal partnership, our assets and abilities were developed into a written document, which served as a touchstone for us throughout the project.

Third, *crafting the syllabus components together profoundly influenced the shape of the course*. Recognizing syllabi as a codification of

the university's infrastructure (Webb et al., 2007) and shaping it collaboratively with Allison, was a major way of fracturing a dominant technical document to include a traditionally unheard voice. Before we co-taught the course, we built it together. Allison and I looked through textbook options; neither of us had taught such a class before, so we collected knowledges from our communities to co-construct the most technical document of the course- the syllabus.

We built the course schedule with the knowledge that Allison would be out on maternity leave for a portion of the semester; we constructed the reading schedule so that students would have both theoretical knowledge of the genres, as well as historical knowledge of LE, before their work began in earnest. We spent Wednesday afternoons during the summer discussing the document, editing language, and revising deliverables and due dates. As a technical communicator, co-authoring this document was a clear way to enhance our traditional models of service-learning with a feminist community engagement praxis. Sharing the authoring responsibilities of this document sends a clear message regarding the course design, purpose, and model.

Finally, the use of *“co-teachers,”* rather than *teacher and community partner, profoundly shaped students' experiences.* Early in the semester, in surveys disbursed each month, students consistently continued to affiliate with myself, presumably as a representative of the university, rather than with Allison, whose spatial situatedness was apart from traditional notions of higher education. While this is in part due to the spatial reality of the course (physically located on campus), students were given ample course time to spend off-campus. They continued to express confusion about the purpose of the service-learning component until we offered reflection questions prompting them to relate their work to, at that point, obvious structural inequities in their community.

For us, a defining moment was mid-semester; I had known my partner for twice as long as I had known my students. Many students were claiming Allison was not communicating with them or not sharing the information they needed. Allison and I spoke easily about these frustrations, and I gave the class the following analogy: I am one

parent; Allison is the other. We communicate more often with each other than with you. We know what you say to each of us.

This influenced students' grades and production, too. For instance, while I thought certain groups produced technically excellent work, Allison felt the work was not steeped in the narratives of her organization well enough to truly convey the organization's need and approach. Therefore, the students' work did not fully represent LE's work and stories.

Students began to recognize we were not simply non-directive in many respects; we also eschewed the traditional models of community engagement pedagogy they had read about early in the semester in preparation for their learning experience. As students realized the nature of Allison's and my partnership, they responded with greater deference to Allison's instructions and approach to revisions.

## **REFLECTIONS**

No piece on community engagement would be whole without reflection. As a service-learning instructor and community engagement scholar and researcher, I offer three thoughts as to how we can continue to marry service-learning as a practice and community engagement as a theory to embody whole, honest praxis. These reflections, along with the tentative suggestions that grow from them, are, I hope, generative.

First, this article is not co-authored. Allison, my partner, who engaged in the development and implementation of this course, has neither the time nor the need to publish in an academic journal. This note warrants a comment or two on the methods by which academics who engage in research and scholarship on service-learning and community engaged pedagogies are disadvantaged. It seems best to have articles such as these co-authored; if Allison and I are true collaborators, shouldn't we be publishing together? But this mere suggestion discounts the importance of certain capital to our nonprofit partners. Depending on the institution, faculty must recognize when too much is being asked. We must recognize that

the credibility of publication often does little, if anything, for our partners.

The moment of requesting a co-authored effort on this article was the moment when I read my partner's reaction and took a step back. The concern, and philosophical struggle, over whether this article would be epistemologically less valuable without the nonprofit partner's co-authorship, was a drawn-out and fraught process. Ultimately the traction Allison gained by building the course was the sort of capital and investment most valuable to her. Wider name recognition at the institution and in the community, as well as access to interns, grants, and an understanding of the course development process, were what she needed and the sort of capital desired.

Second, it should be noted that ultimately, as the instructor of the course, I finalized the decision on which partner to work with over the summer to develop the course. Some feminist community engagement practitioners suggest, "community collaborators should be intentionally chosen for their ability to expose students to disenfranchised populations" (Seher, 2014); this is a perspective with which I do not agree. For here again is the threatening power of the university: the ability to *choose* is a luxury our grassroots and nonprofit partners do not share with us. They rarely get to decide which students to host, which courses they'll partner with, what needs will be met. While it can be argued that this is the nature of nonprofit work, the very fabric that undergirds community engagement and service-learning in the university directly contradicts this debasement or othering of the work done outside of academia or for-profit sectors.

For this case, there was no shortage of interested parties. However, given the opportunity to build a course collaboratively again, I would certainly be examining this process. Institutional power in choice draws the project further from its roots. What does it mean when instructors and faculty make the final decisions about the organizations with which they partner? As a tentative answer, perhaps we should look at Offices of Community Engagement and Partnerships or Centers for Community Engaged Learning, as the go-betweens, the advocates for nonprofit agencies in the community.

Perhaps these campus-based entities can act more as fair brokers for the development of truly democratic partnerships.

Finally, while I believe this case could be a template of sorts for a number of programs and courses, I remain aware of the particular situatedness of this privilege: to teach a class on proposal writing, with a willing and engaged partner and invested students with access to higher education. The fundamental tenant of this approach is that service-learning initiatives can lose sight of broader community engagement aims. One method of rectifying this is to embrace the diverse representations nonprofit partners bring to course development and implementation. This course was the first of its kind in terms of construction and implementation at my institution. While the work to *build* the course was not funded, the work to *implement*, as well as *research* the class, was financially supported. Spending between five to ten hours a week on preparation and research during the summer months allowed for a smooth roll out of the course. Moreover, I worked with two other nonprofit partners, with Allison's support, to ensure her organization was not overwhelmed with well-meaning students. Generally, the front-end preparation, agreement upon pedagogy, guest speaking, reading materials, and site visits made for a largely uneventful and mostly enjoyable semester. It was during the summer months, too, that my theoretical knowledge of community engagement greatly increased, which enabled me to articulate my position in relation to present technical and professional communication representations of community engagement and service-learning, thereby justifying the need for course co-construction.

## **BROADER IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The case presented here and the literature in democratic community engagement, are applicable to scholars working in writing studies, broadly construed. Yet building such praxes is an endeavor born of (largely) North American constructions of service-learning. Steeped in this understanding is a particular belief about what service-learning and community engagement initiatives look like for institutions of higher education in America. We should consider how our courses can transcend concerns of the locality of service-learning narratives, while envisioning methods of collaborative course construction that

extend beyond one's university, city, state, and national boundaries. Walton (2013) suggests there are a number of options to begin examining civic engagement in praxis. These are sensible places to continue exploring collaborative projects that enhance and amplify partners' voices.

I hope engaged practitioners and researchers—in both local, national, and international contexts—keep the following forefront in their mind: the importance of beginning projects with an asset based approach rather than a deficit model (Gorski, 2011); a belief in the “value of collaborative and justice-based community engagement” (Mena and Vaccaro, 2014); and a recognition of the importance of initial interactions between partners. As Noel (2014) notes, universities are fairly criticized for dominating the service-learning agenda and usually only superficially impact communities. Moreover, at an institutional level and an individual level, university representatives should “[reject] the unidirectional, top-down approaches that all too often characterize university-community interaction” (Hartley et al., 2009). The implications of this are broad. It requires service-learning practitioners find the tenuous balance between pursuing an engaged curriculum and allowing community-driven needs to surface. We must recognize need in all partners without diminishing assets, and practice humility and openness in the pursuit of partnerships.

Engagement efforts undertaken without considerable project development and management, or lacking regular self-reflection and assessment, merely reify the discourses that disempower communities. As good citizens ourselves, engaged in justice-oriented work, we should revolt against our ability to create a space for student learning at the expense of partners. This is simply a reassertion of the hegemony of the university, a reiteration of colonialism. We can instead harness the history of community engagement and service-learning to embody democratic engagement. We can utilize our affiliation with these histories to reinvigorate engaged pedagogies both within our field and across disciplines.

Because the field of service-learning more generally is fraught with questions about validity, assessment, value, rhetoric, and meaning, the applications of the pedagogy within disparate disciplines can

be an exercise in adapting to constant change. Institutionalized service-learning efforts are evolving due to new constraints on funding, the necessity to show impact, and the requirements to assess productivity; like institutionalized service-learning, disciplines situated in the humanities are facing similar concerns. Herein lies the problematic nature of how we embrace service-learning and community engagement pedagogies. When embraced to articulate productivity, meaning, fiscal importance, and community impact, community engagement is simply a tool rather than a mindset.

Awareness of our language, awareness of our motivations, and awareness of our goals—of our rhetorical situation as educators, theorists, and practitioners—allows us space to embody new feminist engagement ideals. Reflection ensures that whatever our engagement activities are, we've undertaken and developed them with awareness and attunement our partners in learning: our students, our community, and our peers. This puts us in a position, with insight from our partners, to assess whether these efforts are productive, pedagogically sound, and meaningful for all involved.

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