

From Discourse Communities to Activity Systems: Activity Theory as Approach to Community Service Writing

Michael-John DePalma, University of New Hampshire

This essay considers the implications of using David Russell's activity theory to re-conceptualize models of community service writing (CSW) that stem from discourse community theory. Here I argue that the notion of discourse community is of limited use to practitioners committed to CSW, because it leads students to adopt unrealistic expectations about their roles in CSW projects and it prevents them from accounting for a number of important factors while doing CSW. In its place, I offer activity theory as a guiding framework that students can use to learn about the multilayered activity systems they are seeking to work in as collaborators in CSW projects.

Increased attention to service-learning by writing researchers in Rhetoric and Composition over the last ten years has led to the development of a rich and multifaceted subfield with its own theoretical frameworks, research methodologies, and writing pedagogies. With the publication of books such as Thomas Deans' *Writing Partnerships: Service Learning in Composition*, the dissemination of edited collections such as Linda Adler-Kassner, et al.'s *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition*, and the creation of scholarly journals like *Reflections: A Journal of Writing, Service-Learning, and Community Literacy*, this subfield has matured in significant ways and has influenced the way writing is taught in many post-secondary contexts. An important part of this maturation process has been the ongoing dialectic between efforts to promote service-learning in composition teaching and efforts to complicate assumptions about the goals and methods of service-learning in the teaching of writing. Marjorie Ford's and Ann Watters' *Writing for Change: A Community Reader and Guide For Change: Resources for Implementing Community Service Writing* are familiar examples of early works that aimed to establish a space for service-learning in composition teaching. Bruce Herzberg's "Community Service and Critical Teaching" and Anne Ruggles Gere and Aaron Schutz's "Service-Learning and English Studies: Rethinking 'Public' Service" serve as examples of research that call attention to the complications of enacting established service-learning pedagogies. This project falls into the latter category.

In the fall of 2007 as part of my teaching assistantship, I was given the opportunity to teach an undergraduate technical writing course (ENGL 502) at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). ENGL 502 is designed to teach students to produce documents that can communicate technical information effectively and efficiently while fostering a critical attitude toward the use of discourse and technology. A major component of ENGL 502 is an eight-week service-learning project that students begin at the semester's midpoint. In helping students prepare for their community service writing (CSW) projects, I go to great lengths to emphasize what is for me service-learning's most powerful outcome: "the ability to create knowledge with those whom the knowledge serves" (Cushman 821). Following Cushman, I believe that one of the most important consequences of service-learning is that "students and community residents can develop

reciprocal and dialogical relations with one another,” relations which provide space for all parties involved in CSW projects to have a voice in the process of knowledge-making (822). This outcome only becomes possible, however, when the multiple literacies, discourses, and ways of knowing at play are valued and taken seriously by students, instructors, and community partners. Put slightly otherwise, when instructors impose a particular form of literacy (e.g., functional, critical, cultural), a single objective, or a narrow set of expectations in CSW, a mutually beneficial relationship becomes impossible. In such instances, students’ understandings of their community partner’s literacies, objectives, and expectations do not grow out of particular circumstances; they are instead limited to the categories made available by the literacy continuum, instructors’ assumptions about the community partner, and his or her own expectations.

In order for true reciprocity to develop through CSW projects, students must begin as learners in the community settings they enter, and instructors must attempt to make explicit the tacit conditions that constitute particular communities. For this to occur, it is necessary that instructors provide students with a framework for analysis that will allow them to understand the complex, multilayered composition of the particular discourse communities that they seek to enter. The question thus becomes: How might students best develop an understanding of the literacies, objectives, and expectations they need to know in order to participate in the communities they are seeking to collaborate with? And related to this, How might an instructor arrange for CSW experiences that provide students opportunities for creating knowledge with those whom the knowledge serves? In what follows, it is these questions I aim to address.

To do so, I consider the implications of using David Russell’s activity theory to re-conceptualize models of community service writing (CSW) that stem from discourse community theory. Here I argue that the notion of discourse community is of limited use to practitioners committed to CSW, because it leads students to adopt unrealistic expectations about their roles in CSW projects and it prevents them from accounting for a number of important factors while doing CSW. In its place, I offer activity theory as a guiding framework that students can use to learn about the multilayered activity systems they are seeking to work in as collaborators in CSW projects.

The Challenge of CSW: A Representative Anecdote

In “Community Service Writing: Problems, Challenges, and Questions,” Nora Bacon calls attention to the ever-present challenge of introducing first-year students to the rhetorical practices, cultural knowledge, and social conventions of an unfamiliar discourse community. To illustrate this point, Bacon describes the trials of a student she observed in a CSW course at San Francisco State University (SFSU). According to Bacon, the problems faced by the SFSU student were likely the result of four gaps in the student’s understanding. Making this point, Bacon writes, “Successful completion of this writing task requires knowledge that the student, predictably, did not have: She was unfamiliar with her genre, barely acquainted with her topic, and uncertain about her audience and purpose” (Bacon 46). The struggles this student had, in other words, can be traced to her unfamiliarity with the discursive conventions employed in this context and her lack of knowledge about the rhetorical situation she faced.

Bacon's explanation of this student's difficulties provides insight into her assumptions about the underlying causes of such struggles. She explains, "We know that full, productive participation in a discourse community comes with time and practice; it requires a period of apprenticeship that involves not only acquiring topic knowledge and discourse knowledge but also growing comfortable with one's own role in the community" (47). Here again, Bacon reiterates the importance of topic knowledge and discourse knowledge, and she adds the need for students to become comfortable with the role(s) they are asked to inhabit in particular contexts.

Bacon's assessment of this student's difficulties leads her to pose three short-term solutions. In response to this student's struggles, Bacon first proposes that it might be helpful to "extend the students' relationships with the community organizations beyond the limits of the academic quarter or semester" (47). She explains that because "acculturation to a discourse community does take time," it is necessary to provide students with more time to work with an organization (47). In her view, this would likely improve students' efforts in CSW projects, because they would have more opportunities to learn the discursive conventions, specialized knowledge, and local norms extant in the communities with which they are working (48). Second, she suggests that instructors "choose writing tasks carefully, avoiding assignments that require a great deal of expert knowledge about a genre or about the agency's work" (47). Bacon is not asking instructors to assign simplistic tasks that will fail to provide students with a challenge; rather, she desires to see assignments that are "both manageable and meaty" (47). Finally, Bacon recommends that CSW instructors expose students to rhetorical variation, teach students methods of rhetorical analysis, and give students opportunities to reflect on both. To this point, she writes, CSW instructors should operate as "analysts of language, ready to examine a wide range of texts, to ask how their form responds to their rhetorical function" ("Swan's Nest" 605). Put another way, a CSW teacher should aim to act as "an investigator of language, one who, together with her students, would study the relationship of text to context in a variety of discourse communities" ("Swan's Nest" 600). Further, she suggests that students should be given "opportunities to write outside the classroom, to experience socialization into multiple discourse communities, and opportunities within the classroom to critically reflect upon their experiences as rhetors" ("Swan's Nest" 607).

I value Bacon's efforts here in that she is urging scholars to return to several questions that have been of central importance not only to discussions of CSW, but to the field of Rhetoric and Composition as a whole, namely: What do students need to know to enter and participate in the communities they are seeking to collaborate with? In what ways might instructors support students' efforts to enter and work in such communities? How might instructors make the tacit conditions that constitute these communities more explicit? Through her research, she makes a compelling case for increased attention not only to the difficulties faced by those attempting to link first-year composition courses to service-learning pedagogies, but more generally for renewed discussion about the means by which to introduce students to unfamiliar discourses, whether they be academic, civic, public, disciplinary, professional, or "alternative" (Schroeder, Fox and Bizzell). Her work points compositionists once again to the enduring need to think more carefully about the

kinds of knowledge, experience, and instruction that are required if university students are to succeed as writers in the various discourse communities they are seeking to enter.

I am in agreement with Bacon's assessment of the root causes underlying the kinds of problems she describes, and I believe that her suggestions for dealing with issues of this kind are useful. It is certainly true that the challenges students face in CSW projects, or any unfamiliar rhetorical context for that matter, can be attributed, at least in part, to their unfamiliarity with the discursive conventions of the particular community, a lack of knowledge about the rhetorical situation they are facing, discomfort with the role(s) they are being asked to inhabit, and limited experience within the community to which they have been assigned to work. It is also likely the case that more time, better-designed assignments, and a greater focus on textual analysis will decrease students' difficulties when participating in CSW projects. That said, I am not convinced that the problems she points to adequately explain the difficulties that the student from SFSU faced, nor am I wholly satisfied with the suggestions she offers in response to these difficulties. To say that the SFSU student's struggles with the assigned CSW project were a result of her lack of topic knowledge, discourse knowledge, and self-awareness about her role in the particular context is of limited use in that it fails to account for many of the elements within any particular context that shape a writer's interactions, behaviors, and cognitive processes (e.g., the hierarchical structures, divisions of labor, activities, histories, tools, objects, and material conditions). By failing to account for such factors, Bacon underestimates the knowledge and awareness that is needed to operate effectively within a community setting.

My intention is not to dismiss Bacon's contribution, for as I noted above, I value her work. Rather, my goal here is to point to a deeper theoretical problem that lies at the core of many CSW courses in which students are asked to produce documents for non-profit organizations. In my view, the narrow scope of Bacon's "diagnosis" and her less than satisfactory suggestions for improvement are symptomatic of the limitations of the theoretical framework through which she is approaching the problem she discusses in her research. The shortcomings of her analysis, in other words, stem from the vagueness and problematic tendencies inherent in the concept of discourse community itself.

The Challenges of CSW: A Personal Anecdote

In doing the CSW project that I assign at UNH, my students have experienced challenges similar to those described by Bacon. Given the complexity of CSW, I have become comfortable with the fact that such challenges are likely to occur. The difficulties faced by one student-group last fall, however, unsettled me to the point that I began to question my approach to CSW. More specifically, my experiences with that particular group of students led me to speculate about the possible limitations of using discourse community theory as the primary lens through which to prepare students for CSW projects.

For the CSW project that I assign in ENGL 502, students are responsible for finding a non-profit organization to work with, determining the scope and pace of their projects, and presenting their finished documents to their clients, to their classmates, and to select

members of the university community. In addition to the documents each group creates for their client, all groups are required to write reader-oriented meeting minutes, progress reports, a business letter, a business proposal, a needs analysis, a formal report, and a letter of reflection. Apart from the final products that students create for their clients, the two most important documents that they produce for the CSW project are the needs analysis and the project proposal. The needs analysis is critical to the success of the project, because it provides students with a space to use all of the information they've gathered about their client to identify the community partner's needs. If the information students collect at this stage of the process is inaccurate or insufficient, they will likely fail in their attempts to satisfy the client's expectations. On the other hand, if students are able to gain a well-rounded sense of their rhetorical situation, they generally have great success. Writing the proposal is also a crucial part of the CSW project, because it is at that point in the project that students propose a detailed plan of the work that demonstrates they thoroughly understand their clients' needs.

To gather the information needed to write the needs analysis and the proposal, students are required to do field and library research about the organization they plan to work with. Two other important components used to prepare students to create documents for their clients are the rhetorical analyses and genre analyses that they perform on the existing documents gathered from their community partner. In framing these activities for students, I have often used discourse community theory as a lens to guide them in their efforts to learn about their community partners' goals, values, beliefs, language practices, structure, and interests—knowledge which I'd long assumed would prepare students to produce documents that they and their clients would be pleased with. After witnessing the failed attempts to write the needs analysis, proposal, and final documents by one particular student-group in my technical writing course last fall, however, I was forced to reexamine my expectations and rethink the strategies I used to prepare my students for such projects.

In looking back over the needs analysis report, project proposal, and final document that the three students produced for their client, I wondered why three students who had been so successful during the first half of the course struggled so much with this project. The students were all responsible, engaged, and capable of doing A-level work, so why were they unable to finish the project they opted to undertake? And why was the work they did so far off the mark? Plagued by these questions, I returned to the students' documents multiple times. After several examinations, I was struck not by what I saw, but instead by what was absent in all three texts—namely, the mention of content.

For their CSW project, this student-group opted to work with an enrichment program that is designed to help economically disadvantaged high school students overcome social, cultural, and economic barriers to higher education. The project they were asked to do was the revision of a student handbook. The program director expressed that the main problem with the existing document was that students in the program were not reading it. He attributed this to several factors, including the document's length, organization, subject matter, design, language use, style, format, and purpose. His desire, therefore, was that the three student writers revise the document so that it appealed to its audience.

Despite the range of issues that the non-profit's director pointed out during the interview the students conducted with him, they chose to focus on a single aspect of the document—its design. Their explanation for ignoring issues of content, language use, style, and purpose in their revision was that they found the document to be “straightforward.” I suspect there were other reasons for avoiding these issues, though. More specifically, I am inclined to believe that this student-group did not address these important issues, because they did not feel prepared to do so. Their hesitancy to substantially alter the document's content, that is, likely stemmed from feeling as if they could not meet the expectations set for them and from feeling as if they had no way to access all of the information necessary to successfully reshape the document. In reflecting on their situation now, I am convinced that these issues were, at least in part, the result of using discourse community theory as the primary lens through which to prepare them for their CSW project.

Using discourse community theory to frame my CSW project, I instruct students to use the processes of research and analysis to gain a thorough understanding of the community partner's goals, habits, values, programs, priorities, and language conventions in order that they might participate in the organization's activities. The problem with this is that it is unrealistic to expect that students will reach a point where they are able to participate in the community organizations that they are working with in the way that one of its members would. While I understand that it is impractical to expect that students will ever in the fullest sense operate as “insiders” in the communities in which they are doing CSW, the lens of discourse community theory has the tendency to subtly imply that through immersion one must take on a discourse community's habits of mind in order to successfully participate in it. This is especially the case in discussions about using field research and in-depth rhetorical analysis to prepare students for successful collaboration with a community partner. An example is Thomas Dean's and Megan Marie's suggestion that “Students need to align their expectations with those of their community partners” when writing their contracts of understanding (194). Statements of this kind seem to imply that it is necessary for students to bring their expectations into alignment with that of the community partner if they are going to be successful in CSW. While this view may be to some extent accurate (I'm not wholly persuaded it is), it is also potentially problematic, because it places students in a position where they are striving to attain a goal that is out of reach. As a result, students may become overwhelmed. This, I suspect, was the case for the group of students that struggled with the CSW project I assigned in ENGL 502 last fall.

Although I never came out and said that they needed to fully immerse themselves in the community organization to successfully revise the handbook, they seemed to come away with that impression and it paralyzed them. Although I cannot say with certainty, I believe that my emphasis on discourse community theory to assist them in gaining a thorough understanding of their community organization's goals, expectations, and language practices helped to create unrealistic expectations. Further, a failure to discuss the relationship among the students' expectations and objectives, the organization's expectations and objectives, my expectations and objectives, and the task itself, served to limit the kind of reciprocity among the parties involved that I had hoped to see.

In addition to feeling as if they could not meet the expectations set for them, the student-group's hesitancy to revise the content of the nonprofit's handbook was also a result of feeling as if they were limited in their ability to gather the information necessary for successful revision. In thinking back on their situation, I am persuaded that their feelings were to some extent warranted. Because this student-group was relying solely on discourse community theory for guidance, they were unable to account for a number of important factors in the rhetorical situation they were facing. Their problem, in other words, was likely a result of the limitations of the concept of discourse community itself.

Some Limitations of Discourse Community Theory

In "What is a Discourse Community?" Patricia Bizzell defines discourse community as "a group of people who share certain language-using practices" (222). These practices can be viewed as "conventionalized" in two respects: First, "Stylistic conventions regulate social interactions both within the group and in its dealings with outsiders" ("What" 222). Second, "canonical knowledge regulates the worldviews of group members, how they interpret experience" ("What" 222). For Bizzell, to belong to a discourse community is not merely to engage in a way of speaking or thinking about a set of issues, it is to inhabit a particular interpretative lens through which to view the world. A discourse community is a group, then, that is linked by shared discourse conventions and common knowledge, both of which are demonstrated via communicative acts between language users who belong to particular groups. According to John Swales, a discourse community must have the following: a "common, public 'goal' the group seeks to accomplish, some work the participants are trying to perform together," a "discursive 'forum' accessible to all participants," shared "discourse conventions or 'genres,'" a way to offer "information and feedback," an "'inbuilt dynamic towards an increasingly shared and specialized terminology,'" and a "'critical mass' of experts in the group at any given time: people who are ultimately familiar with the specialized genres with which the group seeks to accomplish its goals and who thus can initiate novices" ("What" 225-226).

Taken together, Swales and Bizzell would likely say that a discourse community consists of expert members and novice members who share discourse conventions (i.e., genres, stylistic conventions, etc.), canonical knowledge, goals, channels of communication, and specialized terminologies. Given this definition, examples of discourse communities can include both far-reaching communities like citizens of a country, residents of a state, members of a profession or a discipline, alumni/ae of a particular university, or even "the public" and smaller communities such as couples, families, and social clubs. Given the vast range of groups covered by this construct, there are several potential difficulties that are likely to arise as a result of using it to guide curriculum development and pedagogical practices.

Joseph Harris persuasively demonstrates four potential pitfalls of this theoretical construct that must be considered: its tendency to represent discourse as static, its propensity to give the impression that communities are homogenous, its susceptibility to characterizing individuals as either insiders or outsiders, and its vulnerability to vagueness. On the basis of these shortcomings, Harris challenges the idea that "academic

discourse,” or any discourse for that matter, is fixed and stable, a kind of universal language. To make his case, Harris points to the way that the term discourse community is used in David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” and Bizzell’s “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty.” Through his critique, he shows how easily talk about discourse can move “subtly from dynamic to fixed—from something a writer must continually reinvent to something that has already been invented” in discussions of discourse community (100). In particular, Harris critiques Bartholomae for representing the university “as a cluster of separate communities, disciplines, in which writers must locate themselves through taking on the ‘commonplaces, set phrases, rituals and gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion” (100). In characterizing the university in this way, Harris explains, Bartholomae gives the impression that discourse communities are fixed, unified entities that students can enter once they learn its conventions and acquire its knowledge. This is potentially problematic when it is invoked as a means by which to posit that there is a “‘normal discourse’ in the university that is oddly lacking conflict or change,” because it fails to account for the overlap that exists in every discourse community (Harris 99). Harris’ critique also points to the fact that the concept of discourse community is of limited use when attempting to characterize the composition of particular communities, because it is “at once sweeping and vague: positing discursive utopias that direct and determine the writings of their members, yet failing to state the operating rules or boundaries of these communities” (99).

Given the limitations of discourse community theory, I am skeptical of its ability to provide students with the forms of understanding that they actually need to participate effectively in the kinds of activities that CSW courses like Bacon’s and my own demand. While discourse community theory leads students to account for a number of essential elements extant in any given site of rhetorical activity, there is far more knowledge needed if students are going to effectively collaborate with their community partners. To gain a sense of any rhetorical context, it is necessary that initiates be provided with a means by which to account not only for topic knowledge, discourse knowledge, genre conventions, document design, formatting procedures, the community’s goals, and rhetorical situation, they also must be offered analytical tools that will encourage them to investigate the hierarchical structures, divisions of labor, activities, histories, tools, objects, and material conditions of CSW contexts. Questions regarding these issues, although essential to understanding the operation and composition of any community, are rarely raised in CSW courses, however, because they do not exist in the framework provided by theories of discourse community. Thus, CSW courses guided *primarily* by theories of discourse community have built-in limitations that will likely lead to (1) an inadequate understanding of what students need to know in order to enter and participate in the communities they are seeking to join, (2) poor direction concerning the ways that instructors might support students’ efforts to enter and participate in such communities, and (3) limited results for instructors attempting to make the tacit conditions that constitute particular communities more explicit. In order to minimize these difficulties and provide a basis for forging mutually sustaining and mutually informing relations with community partners, it is necessary that instructors provide students with a framework for analysis that will allow them to gain a sense of the complex, multilayered composition of the communities that they hope to work fruitfully with.

With this objective in mind, the remainder of this paper considers the ways that David Russell's activity theory might influence how we think about CSW models guided by discourse community theory. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of activity theory, as described by Russell. In the final sections, I discuss the implications of using activity theory to re-conceptualize approaches to CSW. In order to illustrate the usefulness of employing activity theory in CSW projects, I explain the ways that it has allowed me to rethink the instruction surrounding the CSW project I use at UNH.

From Discourse Communities to Activity Systems

In "Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing Instruction," Russell points to the ways that activity theory might inform composition research and teaching. In this article, Russell defines activity theory "as an analytical framework that analyzes human behavior and consciousness in terms of activity systems" (53), and he describes activity systems as "goal-directed, historically situated, cooperative human interactions" that are comprised of subjects (individuals or groups performing a task), object(ive)s (the common goal(s) the individual or group seeks to accomplish), and tools (machines, writing, speaking, body language, physical structures) that mediate the interaction (53). Put another way, activity systems are "collectives (often organizations) of people who, over an indefinite period of time, share common purposes (objects and motives) and certain tools used in certain ways" ("Process" 81). These systems can be both small and large; for instance, both a face-to-face interaction and a professional field fall under the purview of this heading. Moreover, as Russell explains, all activity systems are "historically developed," or produced via the interactions between past and present cultural knowledge and environments; "mediated by tools," that is, they are arbitrated by both traditional tools (levels, computers, scales) and semiotic tools (writing and speaking); "dialectically structured," which is to say that there is an interconnected, ever-shifting relationship between the tools, the task, and the tool users in which the tools used for performing an activity shape and are shaped by the tools, the task, and the tool users carrying out the activity; "analyzed as the relations of participants and tools," that is, they are "inherently social" in that "[c]hange occurs through the historically situated interactions of people and tools over time"; and "changed through *zones of proximal development*," meaning that interactions between "novices" and "experts" make accomplishing a desired objective possible ("Its Implications" 54-56).

Russell argues persuasively that, although similar in many ways to discourse community theories, activity theory is preferable to theories of discourse community as a theoretical framework and an analytical tool in several ways. In what follows, I would like to extend Russell's discussion to illustrate the potential implications of employing activity theory as an analytical framework in CSW courses. To illustrate the potential benefits of using activity theory as an alternative construct in CSW courses, I discuss the ways Russell's framework has enabled me to rethink my approach to CSW.

Activity Theory as Approach to CSW: Implications for Instruction

In bringing my discussion to a close, I would like to offer a few remarks about how the shift from discourse community theory to activity theory that I am proposing has informed the way I think about and prepare my students for CSW, and I would

like to speculate about what this shift might imply for compositionists interested in CSW. To ground my discussion, I consider the ways that activity theory might have provided me with a means to productively respond to the challenges faced by the three aforementioned students in my technical writing class.

As I have shown, using discourse community theory as the primary lens through which to prepare my students for their CSW project likely limited this group's ability to complete their documents, because it led these students to adopt unrealistic expectations about their roles in the project and it prevented them from accounting for a number of important factors in the rhetorical situation they were facing. In what follows, I aim to illustrate how activity theory might help address such challenges.

For my students, unrealistic expectations about their roles led to a kind of paralysis. Because they were under the impression that they had to align their expectations and objectives with their community partner's expectations and objectives to revise the handbook, they became overwhelmed and resorted to doing the only thing that they felt capable of doing: editing the document's design. Had I used activity theory to explain the relationship among the students' expectations and objectives, the organization's expectations and objectives, my expectations and objectives, and the task, it is possible that these students would have had a more realistic view of the CSW project and greater confidence in their ability to revise the handbook's content.

In discussing the relationships among participants involved in CSW, activity theory is preferable to discourse community theory because it offers students a more realistic view of the rhetorical situations students face. It also provides a means for sustaining reciprocity. Unlike discourse community theory, activity theory views social practices (and therefore activity systems) as fluid. Because of this, it is less likely that students will view the communities they enter as fixed and stable entities with unified language-using practices ("Process" 83-84). Rather, they would be apt to see that "no autonomous genre or discrete set of genres exists that can meaningfully be called 'academic' or 'public' or 'educated'" ("Its Implications" 62). Instead of viewing non-profit agencies as homogenous groups that "share the same objective or discrete set of genres," as discourse community theory often implies, activity theory could help students view the communities as an "aggregate of activity systems (and therefore discourses) that do not share the same objective or discrete set of genres"; they are, alternatively, "dynamic, interacting, activity systems (and therefore genres) through which public life is negotiated" ("Its Implications" 61).

Thinking about organizations in terms of activity theory is preferable because it complicates simplistic categorizations that rely on terms like "insiders" and "outsiders" (see Harris 105). Because activity theory sees activity systems as fluid and multilayered, students are less likely to view themselves as "outsiders" who have to align their goals and expectations to that of the community partner's to successfully carry out CSW tasks. Through the lens of activity theory, it is likely instead they will see that despite the fact that a community partner's objectives and expectations are different from their objectives and expectations, it is the task that creates common ground. In this way of thinking, the

participants in one activity system do not have to conform to the objectives and expectations of other activity systems to successfully complete a designated task. Thus, the potential for a mutually beneficial relationship is forged around the task itself.

For students like the three who were in my class last fall, such a perspective could be empowering in that it would allow them to retain a sense of authority in unfamiliar situations and provide a way to see that they do not have to substitute their own expectations and objectives with those of community partners in order to successfully carry out CSW tasks. This holds true for community partners as well. Oftentimes there is an us/them dichotomy that is unintentionally created via discussions of CSW: “What distinguishes *them* as a group? What values do *we* share with the audience? How are *our values* different from those of the audience?” (Cooper and Julier 54, emphasis mine). Such divisions also have the potential to be minimized by substituting the terms offered by discourse community theory with those provided by activity theory.

In addition to providing students with a more realistic view of the roles expected in CSW projects—a view which allows the space needed to forge mutually informing and mutually sustaining relationships in CSW—activity theory also provides students with a more robust lens for analyzing the rhetorical situations they encounter when doing CSW. While the lens of discourse community theory certainly helps students account for a number of essential elements extant in any given site of rhetorical activity, activity theory allows students to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the rhetorical contexts they are working in. Russell’s framework not only supplies students with a means to account for topic knowledge, discourse knowledge, genre conventions, document design, formatting procedures, community goals, and rhetorical situation, it also encourages investigation into the hierarchical structures, divisions of labor, activities, histories, tools, objects, and material conditions that constitute any given rhetorical context.

Accounting for such factors while doing CSW research about their community partners’ needs could have been potentially helpful to Bacon’s student at SFSU and my students at UNH. It would have given them a deeper and more extensive awareness of crucial factors constituting the contexts in which they were writing. In turn, this enriched understanding could have provided them with greater confidence. Because my students and Bacon’s student did not have enough information to carry out their CSW projects, they were unsuccessful in their attempts to collaborate with their clients. Had they used activity theory as the guiding framework in their analyses, however, the outcome in each case may have been different. Employing activity theory could have allowed them to gain the information they needed to confidently carry out their respective projects. They could have acquired information about the power relations, histories, and tools in the activity systems they were working in—information which likely would have provided them with not only a greater understanding of these rhetorical contexts but also with increased confidence; thus, when preparing my students for CSW projects in future semesters, I will urge them to use activity theory as an analytical framework in their attempts to identify the needs of the community partners with whom they are working. Below are several questions that could be of use to students and instructors engaged in CSW projects. For instructors interested in using activity theory as an analytical tool to prepare

students for CSW projects, the questions included here could be of use for providing students with a more robust sense of the contexts they are working in while doing CSW.

In attempting to understand the **material conditions**, **hierarchical structures**, **distributions of power**, and **divisions of labor** in the early stages of a CSW project, students might ask questions such as these: What kinds of activities are performed in this context? By whom? For whom? For what purpose(s)? Who directs these activities? How do they direct these activities? Where do these activities occur? What is the setting like in which these activities occur? Are there other activity systems that perform similar tasks? What kinds of activities are performed in those contexts? By whom? For whom? For what purpose(s)? How does the activity in this context differ from activities in other systems? How is the activity in this context similar to the activities in other systems? Who directs the activities in those systems? What is my role or place in each system?

To acquire information about the **historical development** of a non-profit that students are working with in CSW, the following questions could be of use: What is the history of this organization? How has it changed? What is the history of the project I am engaged in? What was its original purpose(s)? How was it carried out in the past? How was it used in the past? What need was it meant to fill? Has its purpose(s) changed? Who was involved before? Who is involved now? Why did this shift occur? How did this shift occur?

Finally, an enriched understanding of the **tools** that shape the activity systems students are investigating might be gained by asking questions like: What tools are being used? What are the histories of these tools? How are they used? Why are they used? How have they been used in the past? How did the introduction of these tools in this particular activity system change it? How do these tools shape what occurs in the particular activity system now? What tools might improve the way this particular activity system functions? Does the organization have access to such tools? If so, where? If not, why is this the case?

Conclusion

Because of the advantages activity theory provides as a theoretical alternative to discourse community theory, I believe that it has the potential to reshape CSW pedagogies that ask students to write for the community in significant ways. While this project has attempted to demonstrate some of the possible benefits of using activity theory as a guiding framework in CSW, my efforts only point to a fraction of what it might offer. To fully understand the transformative potential of the approach forwarded here, it is necessary for practitioners to employ activity theory in their own CSW projects, for it is only through praxis that we will truly be able to assess its value as a way of thinking about the communities we live in (and between) each day.

Acknowledgments:

I want to thank Paul Kei Matsuda, Tom Newkirk, Steve Simpson, and Jeff Ringer for their insights and guidance throughout the process of writing this essay. I am also grateful to Suzanne Bordelon and Jess Enoch for encouraging me to pursue my interest in service learning. Thanks as well to Sylvia Gale and the additional reviewers of this article for their helpful feedback. Finally, thank you to my family, especially Courtney, for your faith and your love.

Works Cited

- Adler-Kassner, Linda et. al., ed. *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition*. Washington: AAHE, 1997.
- Bacon, Nora. "Building a Swan's Nest for Instruction in Rhetoric." *College Composition and Communication* 51.4 (2000): 589-609.
- _____. "Community Service Writing: Problems, Challenges, Questions." Adler-Kassner et. al. 39-53.
- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." Villanueva 623-653.
- Bizzell, Patricia. *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*. Pittsburg: Pittsburg University Press, 1992.
- _____. "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing." Bizzell 75-104.
- _____. "What is a Discourse Community?" Bizzell 222-237.
- Writing in the Public Interest: Service-Learning and the Writing Classroom*. Eds. David D. Cooper and Laura Julier. 1995. The Writing Center. Michigan State U. 28 Apr. 2006 < <http://writing.msu.edu/content/wipi/c&j.html>>.
- Cushman, Ellen. "The Public Intellectual, Activist Research, and Service-Learning." Villanueva 819-828.
- Deans, Thomas and Megan Marie. "Composition as Community Action: Writing and Service-Learning." *Teaching the Neglected "R": Rethinking Writing Instruction in Secondary Classrooms*. Eds. Thomas Newkirk and Richard Kent. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007. 186-197.
- Deans, Tom. *Writing Partnerships: Service Learning in Composition*. Illinois: NCTE, 2000.
- Gere, Anne Ruggles and Aaron Schutz. "Service Learning and English Studies: Rethinking 'Public' Service." *College English* 60 (1998): 129-149.
- Harris, Joseph. "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 40.1 (1989): 11-22.
- _____. *A Teaching Subject*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997.
- Herzberg, Bruce. "Community Service and Critical Teaching." *College Composition and Communication* 45.3 (1994): 307-19.
- Julier, Laura. "Community-Service Pedagogies" Tate, Rupier, and Schick 132-148.
- Kent, Thomas, ed. *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1999.
- Russell, David. "Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing Instruction." *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*. Ed. Joseph Petraglia. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995. 51 – 77.

- _____. "Activity Theory and Process Approaches: Writing (Power) in School and Society." Kent 80-95.
- Schroeder, Christopher, Helen Fox, and Patricia Bizzell, ed. *Alt Dis: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. Portsmouth, NH: Boyton/Cook, 2002.
- Swales, John. "Discourse Communities, Genres, and English as an International Language." *World Englishes* 7 (1988): 211-220.
- Tate, Gary, Amy Rupier, and Kurt Schick. *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Villanueva, Victor, ed. *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, 2nd ed. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2003.
- Watters, Ann and Marjorie Ford *Writing for Change: A Community Reader*. New York: McGraw, 1995.
- _____. *Guide For Change: Resources for Implementing Community Service Writing*. New York: McGraw, 1995.