

## Service Education as (Auto?)-Ethnographic Encounter

Jim Henry, Director of Composition and Rhetoric, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

If service education is to avoid the many cultural pitfalls that have been signaled to date in the literature, it seems crucial that town-gown articulations be nurtured as organic, reciprocating, knowledge-producing endeavors that position the ethnographic encounter at their epistemological center. For these articulations to be organic, they must grow from encounters between graduate students and community organizations that begin very early in students' scholarly careers—perhaps even as undergraduates in the same locale. This organic relationship should be grounded in writing *with* the organization or *for* the organization. My decades of embedding service learning in an undergraduate course in technical communication and in many internships I have directed have shown me that writing *with* and/or *for* the organization is a key step in the ethnographic encounter that community-based education involves. Students come to know the local culture first as one of its discursive agents, the better to discern if they want to pursue this agency in further scholarship.

This initial ethnographic encounter enables members of the organizational culture, too, to determine the directions that further collaboration might offer, most likely prompting questions frequently asked when cultures are represented in writing: What issues and elements of the culture are to be probed and publicly represented? Who will review the work? What are likely scenarios of reception? What does the organization stand to gain and/or lose? What does the scholar stand to gain and/or lose? How can this foray into knowledge production, possibly culminating in a dissertation or even a book, benefit the organization? The student? The sponsoring university? Etc. Above and beyond the kinds of questions that students will need to ask as they work through the IRB applications, questions of representation and collaborative agency should figure at the center of this scholarship. Errors in either of these domains can have lasting reverberations in the community, long after the service learner/ethnographer *might* have moved on to other locales. This challenge gives me pause.

What gives me hope is that I see students applying to our graduate programs who already have previous experience as writers for community organizations. Our challenge is to help them re-frame their work in the community as part of their scholarly agendas, to make this scholarship an *auto*-ethnographic encounter that generates knowledge in many different ways and that assures the reciprocity necessary for this venture to succeed. Institutions will need to accommodate this new dimension in graduate programs by highly prioritizing such previous writing experience in student admissions criteria, and by prioritizing faculty hiring so that students can be assured of mentors with experience in ethnography and auto-ethnography--which is not often a top priority, at least in English department staffing. But it should be, if we are to make service education as powerful as its potential.