

Expanding Community-Based Work While Maintaining the Edge

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Although conventional academic wisdom discourages young scholars from becoming involved in community-based work, the growing interest in service-learning and community literacy reflected in contemporary scholarship in composition and within the larger academy suggests that these are now viable paths to pursue throughout the trajectory of a scholarly career. Ellen Cushman maintains that by using service-learning and activist research methods to bridge the gap between university-based knowledge and community-based knowledge, “faculty members can have readily apparent accountability, and their intellectual work can have highly visible impact” (“Public Intellectual” 335). The growing visibility of community-based scholarship and practice has allowed emerging scholars to set an agenda that our scholarly work must become legitimized and that the climate of resistance to conducting community-based work early in our professional careers must change. I suggest that we work toward mainstream acceptance of the scholarly value of community-based work to support young scholars’ careers while maintaining the edginess of this type of work by addressing key critiques.

When considering why graduate students often seem hesitant to participate in community-based work, my thoughts return to the introductory course in “teaching writing” required of all new teaching assistants in our department—the course that often provides graduate students their first exposure to the profession and shapes their ideas about scholarship and teaching. In the class, the entire syllabus was on theoretical texts with no focus on the actual practice of teaching, and it was made clear that theory was the currency of value in our new profession. Although the hierarchical privileging of theory over practice is a common discussion within composition studies, I suggest that these tensions are felt among graduate students from the beginning of their coursework. Until recently, for example, as I have begun receiving awards for my service-learning teaching and research, I had internalized the notion that I would be unable to obtain the level of scholarly success of my classmates doing theoretical projects. These recognitions have allowed me a new perspective; despite the disciplinary tensions within the field and within English departments, innovative service-learning work, in general, has the potential to, as Cushman says, “have highly visible impact” (“Public Intellectual” 335).

Recently, I attended the special interest group meeting for service-learning and community literacy at the CCCC conference in New Orleans. Within the discussion, the “old-timers” raised the point that doing community-based work within composition was no longer “edgy.” They suggested that this progression into the mainstream arena was due to the public relations attention service-learning brings to institutions. While I agree with their point, as an emerging scholar using service-learning to stake my claim in the profession, I looked at the issue from a different perspective. I view the growing institutional acceptance of service-learning as a tool to fight pervasive disciplinary and departmental tensions and resistance. Therefore, I suggest that we find ways to tap into this positive view of service-learning in order to create legitimacy for our scholarship and teaching, and to allow space for young scholars to conduct community-based work as their scholarly focus.

On the one hand, I propose that emerging scholars find strategies to leverage the mainstream acceptance of community-based work at the higher administrative levels of the university to legitimize our public practice. On the other hand, however, I also raise caution that we choose these strategies carefully in order to further our progressive, edgy work and to promote critical (and self-critical) scholarship and pedagogical practices. For instance, numerous critiques of service-learning have been outlined within recent scholarship. Scholars maintain that service-learning courses often lack collaboration between students and partners and privilege student/university knowledge over local/community partner knowledge (Cushman, “Public Intellectual”; Flower). They also suggest that traditional models of service-learning courses privilege activism (which becomes conflated with ideologies of service or volunteerism) over reflection, which can perpetuate problematic stereotypes and us/them binaries and that many programs are not designed to support sustainability.¹

For example, Linda Flower argues that for service-learning to succeed it must be viewed as “intercultural inquiry” instead of outreach. She describes the ideal model of service-learning as one that allows for multiple voices and negotiated meanings to occur in practice through collaborative inquiry between students and community partners that develops alternative readings of cultural issues and challenges attitudes about others. Margaret Himley maintains that “regardless of a student’s actual economic status or social identity, the dominant version of the rhetoric of community service may position each and every community service student in a privileged way—as the one who provides the service, as the one who serves down, as the one who writes up” (430). She examines the complex dynamics that develop in service-learning activities causing students and/or community partners to project the role of “other” or “stranger” onto one another, and argues that service-learning projects must find ways to create open dialogues between students and participants, allowing them to engage with the multiple subjectivities of others.

I argue that it is now the agenda of emerging scholars in community-based work to consider scholarly critiques and develop revised approaches. Flower’s work on intercultural inquiry and Himley’s discussion of the potential othering in service-learning, for example, emphasize that a key challenge is developing programs that involve genuine collaboration between community and university partners. Therefore, more research must emerge that explores collaborative approaches, such as courses that involve community partners in curriculum design and encourage the collaborative production of texts. Peck, Flower, and Higgins, for example, describe a successful community literacy project in which urban teens collaborated with college mentors to develop a “hybrid policy discourse” blending rap and explanatory commentary on the issue of public school suspension (212). We must build upon existing models such as this to expand the scholarship in the field and address key critiques without allowing the increasingly mainstream nature of service-learning to devalue the quality of the edgy work being done.

Notes:

¹ See also Herzberg, Himley, Green, Schutz, and Gere, and Cushman, “Sustainable.”

Works Cited

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