



© 2005, Virginia Chappell.

Good Intentions Aren't Enough: Insights from Activity Theory for Linking Service and Learning

Virginia Chappell, Marquette University

- Insights from activity theory—specifically, David Russell's
- synthesis of activity theory with genre theory—suggest ways
- to understand and ease problems of clashing expectations
- encountered in professional writing classes that use a
- client-based assignment model for service-learning.

When the term “community service” comes up, [most of us] naturally think of the corporal works of mercy: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, bury the dead. These are all very tangible examples of providing service to those in need. Noticeably absent from this list is “write for the grossly overworked.”

—Introduction to a student's end-of-course reflection,
Writing for Nonprofit Organizations, Spring 2001

The first time I offered an upper-division, special topics Writing for Nonprofit Organizations class, my students and I stumbled where we expected to sail. Pleased by the prospect of helping community agencies while exploring new approaches to writing, and prepared to put in extra time and effort as part of the process, all of us began with good intentions. But our optimism and generosity were sorely tested by the semester's challenges. We began with high expectations on all sides. The campus service-learning staff had prepared a list of interesting and varied projects at local agencies for students to choose from, and the agencies conveyed enthusiasm

about working with the students. I myself had ten-plus years of experience teaching professional writing classes in which a few students would take the service-learning option to write for a nonprofit each semester; indeed, students' enthusiasm for the work with nonprofits had led me to develop this new class as a variation on my department's standard Writing for the Professions class. Despite this support and background—or, in retrospect, perhaps because of the sense of stability they engendered—I had prepared neither myself nor my students for the challenges and problems we would encounter.

Foremost among these challenges were shifts in contexts and circumstances at the nonprofits for which the students were preparing projects. The most striking occurred when a pair of students working on grant proposals for a public Montessori school lost the *raison d'être* for their project because the school board decided to provide additional funding. This was good news for the school, but disruptive for the service-learners, especially because their contact person at the school could no longer make her liaison work with them a priority. After several weeks of canceled meetings and unclear directions from the agency, the students and I proposed that they instead develop a table of potential grant sources and a template for a parents' newsletter, a maneuver that allowed the pair to complete the course. Another student's three months of work developing a newsletter for a small community agency resulted in an excellent design with a major hole on the front page, the space reserved for the executive director's much-delayed letter of resignation and farewell. Our semester ended before the director could steel herself to write it, so the student was not able to see the project come to fruition. A local agency preparing to launch a community justice center asked two students to prepare a report on the development of such centers in other cities, but the students wasted many hours of research because their contact person was mistaken about the name of the city where the model project was located and because no one thought to mention that the little room down the hall was an agency library housing a wealth of relevant materials. The policy sheet that another student was working on changed weekly as the board and executive director worked out the language they wanted, putting the frustrated student in a passive role of transcriptionist. Well into the term, two of the seventeen students in the class had to pick up new projects at new agencies, one because her first agency partner was too busy to assign her a project, and the other because her

contact person kept rewriting her work but couldn't explain why it was falling short of the mark. In each case, we found a solution that enabled the student to apply course content meaningfully and create something useful, but the cumulative effect of the various difficulties was tension and uncertainty for everyone. Since then, I have been tinkering with the course as I look for practical ways to forestall such problems and for theoretical concepts that will accommodate their inevitability.

The combination of disappointment and determination in the epigraph for this essay captures the mixed feelings students have expressed at the end of all three of my professional writing classes that have focused on client-based projects for nonprofit organizations (NPOs). The students and I have learned the practical consequences of what even I had previously understood only in the abstract:

- Circumstances can change quickly in the nonprofit workplace, even from hour to hour.
- Major fund-raising events eclipse all other activity.
- The daily activity patterns of full-time students rarely mesh with those of agency personnel.
- Faxes are often more efficient than phone messages.

These seemingly trivial details, culled from students' written reflections, my notes from their end-of-course oral briefings, and their responses on exit surveys from the service-learning program, underscore some of the paradoxical commonplaces of community-based professional writing:

- The prospect of writing something that "makes a difference" is energizing.
- Negotiating the differences between classroom and workplace contexts is difficult.
- Discovering how hard it is to "do good" in the world can be disillusioning.

The tensions inherent in this list can easily present stumbling blocks. Furthermore, the difficulties of negotiating between classroom and workplace magnify in impact when everyone in the class is immersed in dramatically new contexts for writing. As I have modified each subsequent syllabus, searching for better ways to help students move efficiently between school

and agency contexts, my reflections have led me to the broad analytical perspective of activity theory as a useful framework for uncovering and examining the dynamics at play.

Linda Flower has put her finger on what I have come to recognize as a core problem: “They [I substitute “we”] came prepared to act; they [we] really needed to inquire” (182). In the

November 2002 *College English*, Flower

argues that “a fundamental conflict remains...unresolved, when students (fired up with confidence in social change) confront the suddenly realized limitations of their own understanding” (181-82). She urges that we “confront the conflicts within the everyday practice of outreach,” conflicts that, quoting activity theorist Yrjö Engeström, she describes as the “‘multitude of dis-

parate elements, voices and viewpoints’ that emerge as contradictory ideologies and practices” (182). These disparate elements are at play even within invited, well-defined projects such as program brochures, volunteer manuals, or grant proposals because community-based projects inevitably challenge students to respond not just to genre constraints, but to a complex nexus of rhetorical, financial, and social constraints both within the agency and outside, in the organization’s relationship to the larger community. These constraints take students well beyond textbook scenarios for a given genre because work at community agencies necessitates activities very different from typical faculty-student interactions. Students need to learn about the agency’s mission, discern their assigned document’s purpose within that mission, and then plan—in effect, schedule—a process for creating that document in collaboration with extremely busy people who are not attuned to the rhythms of a college semester.

Students need to learn about the agency’s mission, discern their assigned document’s purpose within that mission, and then plan a process for creating that document in collaboration with extremely busy people who are not attuned to the rhythms of a college semester.

A logical beginning for the inquiry that Flower recommends is to examine the inherent differences between classroom and workplace activities. In the pages that follow, I suggest how insights from activity theory—specifically, David Russell’s synthesis of activity theory and genre theory—can help instructors of

professional writing anticipate (albeit not completely forestall) and then prepare students to handle and learn from problems that are likely to arise when they are pulled out of their familiar contexts of activity. Russell's analysis of differences and linkages between classroom and nonacademic writing is useful for guiding students through productive client-based service-learning experiences, experiences which will in turn help them prepare for the transition to writing outside the academy in any number of contexts. Indeed, Louise Rehling uses her experience coordinating internships at nonprofits for students studying business and professional communication to argue that "internships in nonprofits often can provide many of the same transitional benefits as internships in industry, and more" (77).

Writing to Serve

Assignments that invite writing students to undertake projects for NPOs introduce them to new genres and activity systems and thus offer many advantages for student learning. Thomas Huckin, writing in 1997 to encourage business and technical writing teachers to incorporate service-learning into their pedagogy, pointed to a consensus among educators that "community writing projects are motivating to students, lead to better audience awareness, foster collaborative writing, help develop project management skills, and promote a socially oriented rhetoric" (50). As Huckin and others have emphasized over the past decade, two important components of classroom activity distinguish service-learning writing projects from perhaps simpler or "ordinary" client-based writing projects: (1) formalized reflection about the service experience, and (2) examination of the social problems that the partner NPO addresses. What then separates writing courses using a client project model from many other service-learning courses across the curriculum is that students who undertake these writing projects for community clients are doing service by *writing for* a community group (see Deans 17 and 53–84).

On my campus, the service-learning program uses the term *product model* to describe courses in which students do service by writing *for* clients, that is, by providing agencies with written documents, videos, or computer databases (Service Learning at Marquette 2). However, the more prevalent service-learning model on our campus is what Service Learning at Marquette calls the *placement model*. In courses that use this model, students engage in service as a means of testing out classroom concepts in the community, returning to the

classroom later to reflect upon those concepts and their applicability outside academia. In this model, students typically serve off-campus agencies' clients directly, for example by playing with children at a shelter or translating tax forms at a storefront NPO. Then the students write *about* their experience and reflect on its implications for course material and vice versa. The difference between these product and placement models parallels the distinction between two of the paradigms Thomas Deans identified in his research on community-based pedagogy in English studies during the mid-1990s: writing *for* the community and writing *about* the community (17).

Two other models deserve attention as potential superstructures for service-learning in professional writing classes. First is the *presentation model*, in which students use classroom material to prepare presentations for community audiences (Service Learning at Marquette 2)—a variation on writing *for* the community. The second is the more explicitly activist model implicit in Deans's third paradigm, *writing with* the community (17, 110–141). As the preposition *with* suggests, this model relies on a full and continuing partnership between campus and community groups, typically focusing on issues of justice and community action (see Jacoby). Danika Brown examines in detail the ways in which these activities often engage students within a Freirean framework of *praxis*, *history*, and *dialogue* (19–23). In this model, Bruce Herzberg, Ellen Cushman, Linda Flower, and others apply critical pedagogy to guide students' work with members of community groups in, for example, community literacy programs, research on the causes and effects of community problems, or projects that apply academic knowledge to community problem-solving efforts.

The differences among these paradigms for service-learning, while perhaps obvious to instructors in professional or workplace writing classes, are not necessarily obvious to students when they enroll in those classes. When students write *about* their experience in the community, their understanding of themselves as students may expand along with their knowledge and awareness, but their writing takes place and is judged within an academic context. By contrast, writing *for* or *with* a community partner opens a new world of social and rhetorical constraints as students move from acting and writing as individuals to collaborating with community partners. Thus, a client-based project in a professional writing class by definition puts students in a new

role. The student enters the community context as a consultant or a freelancer would—as someone with special skills who will provide requested services.

When students take the writing *about* model to be the norm for service-learning, as those in my first Writing for Nonprofits class did, their naïveté about workplace communication and planning, together with unrealistic (or perhaps merely unexamined) expectations about consultation and collaboration, can create significant disadvantages. Even students who have done considerable volunteer work or who have profited from previous service-learning experiences that followed the writing *about* model are likely to need specific professorial guidance to recognize the differences in paradigms so that they can adjust their expectations about interacting with their clients and develop strategies for managing their projects. Otherwise, if students wait for someone at their agencies to lead them by the hand into a project, deadlines will be missed, projects will run aground, and disenchantment will settle in. Similarly, even instructors who have considerable experience with client-based writing projects can be naïve about the pitfalls inherent in inviting or assigning a class to do this kind of service. I count myself among them.

The Usefulness of Activity Theory

When students have good intentions but naïve expectations about community-based writing, a useful map for guiding inquiry into the shifting contexts, purposes, and discourses they are about to experience comes from Russell’s melding of activity theory (as articulated by Michael Cole and Engeström) and genre theory (as articulated by Charles Bazerman). These theories are energized by parallel impulses to move from the individuated to the culturally mediated. Cole and Engeström’s activity theory, rooted in the cultural-historical theories of Vygotsky and Luria and nourished by recent work in anthropology and distributed cognition, argues that not individual cognition but multi-faceted and highly contextualized interactions—that is, activity systems—are the best basic unit for analyzing human behavior (8). Analogously, Bazerman’s work with genre theory seeks to move our notion of genre from the study of textual features to examination of “*systems of genre*...that interact with each other in specific settings” (97, italics in original). Russell’s synthesis of the two is similarly marked by a broadening of perspective. His intent is “to understand the writing—and power relations—of people in and among

institutions such as schools, academic disciplines, and professions” (508).

Russell suggests three means of analysis for facilitating this understanding, all of which move from the discrete to the dynamic. He urges “a broader unit of analysis than text-as-discourse” and “wider levels of analysis than the dyad.” Most broadly, he calls for examination of collectivity and reciprocity, or, as he puts it, “an expanded theory of dialectic that embraces objects and motives of collectives and their participants as well as reciprocal interactions among minds and texts in the interpenetration of social language” (508). This broadening perspective runs parallel not only to the shifts in understanding advocated by contemporary activity and genre theories, but to the practical challenges of an individual student’s move from classroom to workplace, or temporary workplace, for a client-based assignment.

Service-learning places students in the uncomfortable role of a neophyte outsider, someone who needs to figure out how to create texts that will achieve not-yet-understood goals in an unfamiliar context, a place where even getting responses to telephone messages requires a new kind of discernment.

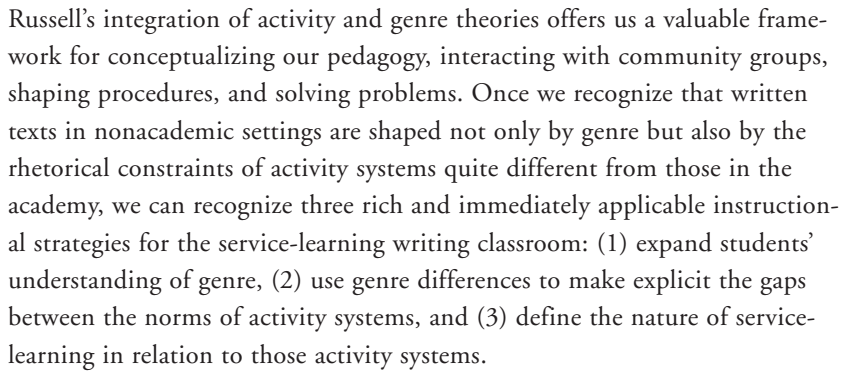
Such moves, not necessarily purposeful or always self-aware, take students out of the role of an accomplished academic writer, someone who knows how to create texts that demonstrate knowledge and accomplishment. Instead, service-learning places them in the uncomfortable role of a neophyte outsider, someone who needs to figure out how to create texts that will achieve not-yet-understood goals in an unfamiliar context, a place where even getting responses to telephone messages requires a new kind of discernment.

Context is everything in activity theory. Russell says that one of the major effects of his proposed synthesis is that it treats context “not as a separate set of variables but as an ongoing, dynamic accomplishment of people acting together with shared tools, including—most powerfully—writing” (508-509). Here we see precisely the relevance of his synthesized theories to service-learning writing projects. The very idea of writing for others, of creating texts through which other people—new acquaintances—may act together to accomplish nonacademic goals differs greatly from the writing that college and university students do to accomplish their academic goals. Theorizing about these differences as functions of interacting activity and genre systems

helps us understand the complexities involved and suggests how we can help students understand them as well.

Russell problematizes theories that conceptualize writing as conversation (a not uncommon trope in introductory composition classes) by arguing that “many collectives (such as disciplines, professions, governments, industries, and educational institutions) have long-term objectives and motives beyond conversation” (507). In such collectives, Russell continues, “the object of dialog is not ordinarily the conversation itself (as it might be in casual talk among friends or in literary productions [or classroom papers]) but some shared object and long-term motive” beyond the discourse (507). When we add NPOs to the list of collectives and consider the goals for which they might use written texts—service delivery, volunteer recruitment, fund-raising, or event promotion—we can begin to sense the dynamics students are likely to encounter when they leave their classrooms to create texts for a community agency. Furthermore, these are texts that, not incidentally, the students must bring back to the classroom context to earn a grade and course credit. The texts that NPOs request help with are shaped by long-term objectives and complex motives for influencing a variety of audiences, such as clients, financial donors, and potential volunteers. These rhetorical purposes are largely unfamiliar to undergraduates, in part because NPOs themselves are unfamiliar to them and in part because the nonprofit context engenders purposes and principles different from those of the reports and correspondence commonly found in professional writing textbooks.

Students might readily comprehend the formal genre constraints of a text they are to author—for instance, a brochure, a manual, or a proposal, which is the most difficult because of its multiple constraints. But if they are inexperienced in a particular world of work or a particular community, they may understand only vaguely what the text is being designed to accomplish: what its producer-distributor (the agency) hopes it will *do*, and how its readers (various sectors of the public) will use it. Activity theory, as Russell explains, extends our analysis of writing and its products beyond “texts...or minds [or] conceptual schemes...[to] what is in between—the social intercourse” (509). Instructors of professional writing who invite students to write for community clients need to make visible this social intercourse and the activity systems that motivate it.



After they are introduced to fundamental concepts about audience analysis and rhetorical aims, students in workplace writing courses need instruction in conceptualizing what the text(s) they create for workplace contexts will do and how various players at their NPO service-learning sites are planning to use those texts. One factor very different from academic work, for example, is that some of these texts will have multiple uses—a brochure might recruit volunteers as well as donors, for example, or a policy manual for employees might be written with an eye to satisfying both public and private funders.

- Imagine asking your students to consider ways in which the genres they encounter at their placement agency can be construed as “forms of life” or “ways of being.”

Chappell | 43 |

Russell's construction helps me reconceptualize one of my favorite classroom activities—working backwards from promotional materials that students collect to establish our own standards of good practices before we examine the textbook's advice. Passing around a wide variety of brochures or newsletters, we note genre categories, then analyze and compare the documents' evident purposes and effectiveness. The students confer in small groups to choose which ones appeal visually, which ones are most convincing, and which ones incline us to act by joining an activity or donating time and money. Students inevitably find materials with fancy folds or die-cut shapes to be initially the most appealing. The question about which is most convincing transfers attention to the power of emotionally evocative images as we note photographs of ethnically mixed groups at play or cheerful oldsters at an adult day care. In Russell's terms, the exercise shifts attention from textual characteristics to actions that people and groups make in response to various texts. Trained academically to scrutinize even implicit arguments carefully, students are the most critical and cautious about choosing materials that incline them to act. This analysis of multiple examples provides a basis for understanding that a document's success is less a matter of its formal features and more a matter of how design and purpose not only engage and convince readers but advance the interests of the collective behind the document.

Examining Activity Systems

"The process of learning (to write) new genres," Russell contends, citing Engeström, "is a part of a process of expanding one's involvements with activity systems" (516). His point connects directly with the first goal that Deans outlines in his description of the "writing *for* the community" paradigm: Students learn nonacademic writing practices and reflect on differences between academic and workplace rhetorics. Russell's work helps us address this goal by expanding it into examination not just of writing practices and rhetorics, but of activity systems.

Modifying Cole and Engestrom's more complex diagrams, Russell visually depicts an activity system as an equilateral triangle (510), an image that can help students envision new contexts, norms, tools, and purposes they are likely to encounter at their service-learning site. Russell labels the top middle point of his diagram "Mediational Means," defining these parenthetically as "machines, writing, speaking, gesture, architecture, music, etc." The bottom

left point is “Subject(s),” with the parenthetical note “individual, dyad, group.” The label on the bottom right point, “Object/Motive → Outcome(s),” adds important new dimensions to many students’ concepts of purpose and intended use. At this corner, Russell adds the parenthetical phrases “problem space,” by which he means the raw material “on which the subject(s) brings to bear various tools in ongoing interaction with another person(s)” (511), and “direction of activity,” by which he means motive. Motives, Russell says, must necessarily be contested, “as individuals bring many motives to a collective interaction, and the division of labor in the system itself guarantees diversity” (511). Here it might be helpful to draw into the conversation students’ varying experiences with nonacademic texts that they have been expected to respond to or use as employees, consumers, or members of the public, experiences that no doubt include multiple responses and motives.

Through class discussion of Russell’s triangle and of the different ways that activity systems use tools, empower subjects, and motivate outcomes, instructors can help students recognize critical differences between on one hand, what academic experience has led them to think of as normative texts and behaviors, and on the other, the kinds of texts and behaviors desired and expected at their service-learning sites. Perhaps even more helpful is the recognition that these differences in activity systems are inherent in the move from school to workplace. As Russell explains, activity systems interact, “leading and motivating participants to move...in different directions.... [They] pull participants in different directions” (512). The student concerns that are likely to arise fall into three loosely defined categories: goals, guidance, and grades.

“What does my agency really want?”

Students are used to receiving explicit instructions. Indeed, they have learned that even vaguely worded assignments contain implicit criteria that determine grades. But in a small NPO workplace, where document designs typically spring from the socialized knowledge of staff members, it is possible that no one will provide precise specifications for the document that has been requested. Certainly this has been most of my students’ experience, most notably in the case of the frazzled agency director who could not say what to do, only what not to do. Indeed, a given project may be available for a service-learning project mainly because time constraints or fuzzy goals have previously kept it on a back burner. Busy people who don’t have time to research

potential funding sources or write newsletter articles are likely to have even *less* time to show someone else where to do the research or how to articulate an agency “voice” in a newsletter. Service-learners need classroom guidance about how to enact their subject role in order to collaborate with the agency.

“Who can help me get it right?”

Students are used to finding professors during office hours, where we can usually be counted on for guidance and problem-solving. However, at service

Busy people who don’t have time to research potential funding sources or write newsletter articles are likely to have even *less* time to show someone else where to do the research or how to articulate an agency “voice” in a newsletter.

sites where interruption is the norm, an overworked or distracted agency contact can be hard to track down even when a student has an appointment. Despite their own good intentions, agency staff members may not be able to provide effective, timely mentoring. They are managers, after all, motivated by a cause and by serving their clients, not by pedagogy. In a

striking exception, one lucky, and much envied, student from the first non-profits class was paired with the marketing manager of a well-organized senior services agency to design an annual report. She received excellent guidance and produced a captivating report full of photographs she herself had taken. However, the supervision at most of my students’ agencies has been closer to a *laissez-faire* arrangement that left them uncomfortably on their own as subjects/agents. These circumstances become more understandable in light of Russell’s discussion of mentoring as an important practice within activity systems that enables newcomers to reproduce system activities (519-523). Such mentoring takes a lot of time, more time than is typically available to either agency contacts or service-learners, who are usually taking several other courses. Besides, the client agency does not have a stake in such mentoring because, unlike a new employee or volunteer, a student will soon move on.

These factors can be drawn together for a point that must be underscored repeatedly in class: Service-learners doing client projects cannot afford to sit and wait to be mentored. As noted above, they need to figure out how to assert themselves as acting subjects. They must figure out what questions to ask so that they can discern the agency’s goals for their work, obtain the

source materials they need, create a work schedule, and arrange for meetings and feedback, both at the agency and back on campus with their instructor and their peers. In some cases, the best way to get things going may be for the student to sketch out two or three options and ask for a decision by X date. As work on the project proceeds, students must continue to communicate efficiently with their agency contacts and thus avoid any last minute crises. Project drafts and schedules that are not kept in the foreground can slip so low on a busy manager's "to do" list that recovery before the academic term ends becomes impossible. Few, if any, of our agency partners organize their workload around an academic calendar, and they are not likely to adjust their schedules to the culminating rush through finals week. Students who don't appreciate this difference in perspective can run into very difficult deadline problems.

"How will I be graded?"

Because students worry about being graded according to the standards of a relatively familiar activity system (the school's) for writing designed for a different, unfamiliar system (the client's), instructors must provide for formative evaluation as the project evolves.

Interim progress reports to both the instructor and the agency contact work well for this, as does an initial, formal work plan that establishes dates for consultation and feedback. The variables influencing grades must remain subject to negotiation as the term progresses and the parameters of the projects are clarified and perhaps revised. In

the ideal situation, projects can be structured so that agency feedback contributes to the instructor's grading procedures. (See Brown 63–70 for discussion and a suggested process for developing these procedures.)

Service-learners cannot afford to sit and wait to be mentored. They need to figure out how to assert themselves as acting subjects. They must figure out what questions to ask to discern the agency's goals, obtain the source materials they need, create a work schedule, and arrange for meetings and feedback.

Sometimes students may need assurance that they will not be held accountable for agency decisions with which their instructor disagrees. To provide this assurance, I tell students about the problems encountered by a pair of students creating a volunteer manual for a new organization the very first

time I offered a service-learning option. About mid-term, I reviewed a draft of the manual's introduction and suggested that the map they had included under a heading "How to Get to _____ [the agency]" was not needed because volunteers would already know that. But when the students presented my suggestion, the agency contact brushed it aside and insisted on keeping the map. It remained in the final project submitted to the agency and to me, but with no grade penalty. On the same draft of the manual, I also offered suggestions for editing a dense stretch of text that I thought was unwieldy and unclear. However, these sentences turned out to be the agency's mission statement, written by committee and approved by the board. My editing was beside the point, and the students' grade was again unaffected. During the pair's final oral briefing, the entire class learned from our discussion of the pertinent issues, a perhaps more valuable learning outcome than a behind-the-scenes contest about who was right. As activity theory tells us, context and the need to forward the interests of the collective behind a document take precedence; thus, clients are (usually) right about how their documents should turn out.

Standards for document quality can involve the tools at the Mediation Means corner of Russell's diagram in a perhaps unexpected manner in that students sometimes have to compromise their standards or expectations about the final product because of limited budgets or technology at their agency. NPOs' software and printers frequently have less capability than those on campus, limiting the sophistication of document design. Although service-learners may have campus access to desktop publishing programs that will permit advanced design features, if agency staff members won't be able to access these resources for updates, there is no point in using them in the first place. Similarly, budget constraints will probably limit the scope of students' ambitions, influencing the reproduction process, type of paper, use of color, and quality of visuals in the final product. In my experience, an NPO that is prepared to spend the money needed for color reproduction and glossy photographs is more likely to seek the services of an experienced freelancer than a student new to the field. All these practical considerations are important object lessons about professional writing, and students are likely to find them more palatable when they can understand them within the larger context of interacting activity systems.

Communication is crucial in all these areas of concern, and the varying roles of communication tools within different activity systems constitute a central, practical aspect of professional writing about which students typically need to learn more. My experience with traditional college-age students who are writing for community agencies has shown me that communication difficulties are part of the service-learning bargain. Like cutting-edge computer technology, the personalized telephone systems and email that are integral to full-time college students' activity systems are likely to be more sophisticated than those at nonprofits; furthermore, they tend to be used differently. Some of the seemingly obvious differences are easily overlooked. NPO staff work during the day, when students are typically in class, making it difficult to find convenient times for students and agency staff to meet with each other. NPO staff have telephones at their desks but actually sit there infrequently, so someone else answers the phones. NPO offices may have only rudimentary voice mail systems, and students are not used to leaving messages with people they don't know. (Cell phones and cheaper local phone services are easing some of these difficulties.) In addition, if NPO staff use email at all, they generally don't use it as extensively as most students, and in any case are not as likely to answer emails as quickly as students do or expect others to, particularly late at night. On the flip side, faxes often get good responses at agencies, but fax machines are not easy to come by in dormitories or student apartments. Students need help anticipating these potential stumbling blocks and in working their way around them.

Perhaps because of the sheer sophistication of the electronics that students use to manage their social lives (cell phones, voicemail, text messaging, email, Instant Messenger), they sometimes need to be reminded that these devices can be workplace tools as well. Students' work on service-learning writing projects may well be their first occasion for combining the personal and professional when using these tools; the results may be awkward. I often find myself coaching students about the kinds of details to include in a phone message. Furthermore, because part of what I want students to learn through their client projects is how to present themselves as credible professionals, this coaching now includes suggestions that they substitute neutral email usernames (provided by the university) for the coy labels suggesting celebrity or sexiness that are so popular on Hotmail or Yahoo. All of these matters have practical value because they can enhance both efficiency and the students'

stature with the agency at the same time that they help broaden students' ability to negotiate within other workplace activity systems in the future.

Service-Learning as an Activity System

Activity theory reveals that the process of successful service-learning is partly a process of acclimating to a new activity system: service-learning itself. About a month into my first Writing for Nonprofits class, I realized that students had been expecting their experience in the class to resemble an internship. Previously private grumbling surfaced in class when a few complained that they expected more attention and guidance when they were at their partner agency. I realized that while the idea of serving is prominent in our campus culture, these students were seeing service as what the agencies were doing, not they. This misconception probably grew in part from the fact that not many students in the class were actually interacting with their agency's clientele. We discovered together that many students had not expected to work as independently as the *writing for* course structure necessitated. Without realizing it, they had imagined that the agency contact person would take a mentor-like role with them, as they were used to faculty members doing. The students were in the class to learn, and they were accustomed to having that learning measured through the evaluation of people more experienced and knowledgeable than they were. Thus, they expected their agency contact people to tell them what to do and how to do it even more explicitly than in their classes. Then they would do it, and be told how well they'd done. But only a much envied few received this type of consistently close supervision.

As students, the class members were used to being the focal beneficiaries of educational experiences. They needed a clearer picture of the role they were expected to play within the service-learning model governing the structure of the course. As I have come to understand, they needed a fuller understanding of service-learning itself as an activity system, a system with its own norms, through which they would be negotiating the activity systems of both classroom and agency. A good tool for clarifying the nature of these roles and systems as well as for opening up discussion of the tools, contexts, and motives of activity systems is Andrew Furco's diagram of different types of experiential learning situations (Figure 1). Furco, who is not an activity theorist, places several types of experiential programs along a continuum or balance-beam (his term) according to (1) the amount of attention each type or model pays

to the beneficiary of a service versus the service provider, and (2) the degree to which service and learning are each focused upon in the program.

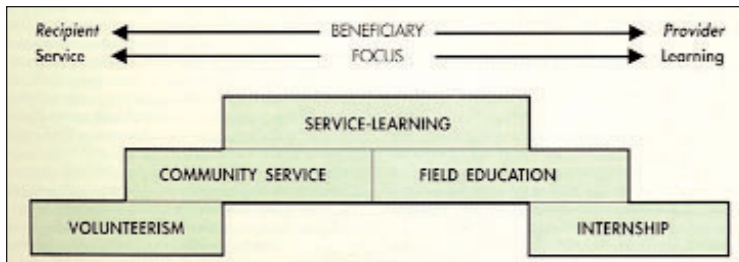


Figure 1. Distinctions among Service Programs (Furco 3)

Having learned from my students' disappointment, I now present Furco's diagram on the first day of all my classes in which service-learning of any kind is an option. We discuss how Furco defines his categories and where class members would place their previous experiences on the continuum. I ask them, for example, to contrast simple volunteering with experiences that fit the *community service* block, one step up and in from *volunteerism*. In community service, the focus is still on service and the recipient's benefits, but, here, Furco says, "students receive some benefits by learning more about how their service makes a difference in the lives of the service recipients" (4). From *internship* at the other end of the continuum, one step in and up takes us to *field education*, where "students perform the service as part of a program that is designed primarily to enhance students' understanding of a field of study, while also providing substantial emphasis on the service being provided" (Furco 5). Our *service-learning* purpose in this class, however, places our work at the top middle of the diagram. *Here's where we are*, I stress: the mid-point of the continuum, where provider and recipient receive equal benefit, where service and learning receive equal focus. *Don't lose your balance.*

Coda

I designed Writing for Nonprofits Organizations to provide students with concepts and skills they can use to write well in any kind of workplace, but I do hope that the course content not only expands their knowledge of the nonprofit world but also helps them acclimate to the activity systems they will encounter in future workplaces of all types. Of course, one of my good intentions is that the class experience will foster values that incline students

toward community engagement if not employment at a nonprofit after graduation. I do hope one day to be able to introduce a former Writing for Nonprofits student as a guest speaker in a future class. So far, those who have gone on to work for nonprofits have either headed out of town or are not primarily responsible for writing projects on the job. In the meantime, I take satisfaction in reflection papers that articulate a continuing commitment to engagement and community. In the first nonprofits class, one young computer whiz who was headed for an entrepreneurial role in a family business wrote, “As a postscript, this course may have addictive properties; I’m now volunteering [at the agency] as a technical consultant, and offering continued support.” A graduating senior, now in law school, who revised a volunteer manual for that same class told us during his final oral briefing, “None of my writing at Marquette has made a difference to anybody else but me. I was glad to have a chance to do something for an organization that makes such an impact on so many different people.” In his final reflection he confessed embarrassment over the fact that he had not previously “looked too deeply” at nonprofits because “a career in the nonprofit sector is not financially rewarding, and their constant solicitation for money was annoying.” But after the course and his experience producing the manual, he not only plans to keep volunteering, but can even imagine serving on the board of an NPO.

We can only trust that the combination of course content and service-learning continues to motivate students like these to turn their good intentions into productive community activity.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Graham Smart for suggesting activity theory as a frame for examining the disjunctures my students were experiencing, to Rebecca Nowacek for helping me develop this article from my 2002 and 2003 CCCC presentations, to the *Reflections* editors and reviewers for their suggestions, and to my service-learning students for their hard work and thoughtful reflections; gratitude always to Bobbi Timberlake and Kim Jensen, who lead Service Learning at Marquette with efficiency and insight.

Works Cited

- Bazerman, Charles. “Systems of Genres and the Enactment of Social Intentions.” *Genre and the New Rhetoric*. Ed. Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway. London: Taylor & Francis, 1994. 79–101.

- Brown, Danika M. "Pulling it Together: A Method for Developing Service-Learning and Community Partnerships Based in Critical Pedagogy." National Service Resource Center. 15 July 2001. Corporation for National and Community Service. 22 March 2004 <<http://www.nationalserviceresources.org/filemanager/download/453/brown.pdf>>.
- Cole, Michael and Yrjö Engeström. "A Cultural-Historical Approach to Distributed Cognition." *Distributed Cognitions: Psychological and Educational Considerations*. Ed. Gavriel Salomon. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1993. 1–46.
- Cushman, Ellen. "The Public Intellectual, Service Learning, and Activist Research." *College English* 61 (1999): 328–36.
- . "Sustainable Service Learning Programs." *College Composition and Communication* 54 (2002): 40–65.
- Deans, Thomas. *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000.
- Flower, Linda. "Intercultural Inquiry and the Transformation of Service." *College English* 65 (2002): 181–201.
- Furco, Andrew. "Service-Learning: A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education." *Expanding Boundaries: Serving and Learning*. Ed. Barbara Taylor. Washington, D.C.: Corporation for National Service, 1996. 2–6.
- Herzberg, Bruce. "Community Service and Critical Teaching." *College Composition and Communication* 45 (1994): 307–319.
- Huckin, Thomas N. "Technical Writing and Community Service." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 11:1 (1997): 49–59.
- Jacoby, Barbara. *Building Partnerships for Service Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- Miller, Carolyn. "Genre as Social Action." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 151–67.
- Rehling, Louise. "Doing Good While Doing Well: Service Learning Internships." *Business Communication Quarterly* 63.1 (2000): 77–89.
- Russell, David R. "Rethinking Genre in School and Society: An Activity Theory Analysis." *Written Communication* 14 (1997): 504–54.
- Service Learning at Marquette. *Report to the Academic Senate*. Milwaukee, 2004.

Virginia Chappell, associate professor of English at Marquette University, teaches a variety of writing and rhetorical theory courses as well as introduction to dramatic literature. In 2004 she completed a sabbatical semester as a service-learner, writing for the international conflict transformation organization Search for Common Ground in Washington, D.C., and researching non-adversarial rhetoric and models for experiential learning. She is co-author with John Bean and Alice Gillam of *Reading Rhetorically: A Reader for Writers* (2nd edition, Longman, 2005).