Taking Root: Seminal Essays in Service-Learning and Professional Communication

J. Blake Scott, University of Central Florida

Over the last several years, service-learning has become a burgeoning area in technical and professional communication studies. In addition to offering pedagogical strategies and theoretical approaches, the scholarship in this area to date points to several concerns for the continuing growth of high-quality service-learning in our field: 1) building reciprocal, sustained community partnerships, 2) developing robust approaches to reflection, and 3) assessing how well models of service-learning achieve their objectives.

I n the research for his 1997 article "Technical Writing and Community Service," Thomas Huckin could not find any technical or professional writing teachers who seemed aware of service-learning (59). Although he conversed with a small sample of teachers, Huckin's observation that few of us were taking advantage of service-learning was likely accurate. Despite the tradition of workplace- and community-based writing assignments in technical and professional communication courses, little had been presented or published about service-learning in the field's various forums.

In the several years since Huckin's pioneering piece, service-learning has become a burgeoning area in technical and professional communication stud-

ies. It's not difficult to find service-learning featured in syllabi, conference panels, and, thanks in part to this special issue, journal articles. Several Leading up to this special issue, several articles, including Huckin's, have provided us with motivation and strategies for preparing the ground for service-learning in the field. These articles have also usefully diagnosed the continuing challenges of this endeavor. In what follows I review the highlights of these articles for those who are not yet familiar with them. Hopefully this review will inspire newcomers to service-learning to read further, give service-learning a try, and, in turn, contribute new insights to the lively conversation.

Although Huckin and others argue that service-learning is particularly well-suited for technical and professional communication courses, they are also careful to promote only particular models. Of the three service-learning models described by Thomas Deans—writing about the community, writing for the community, and writing with the community—most authors advocate the second. That is, most have their students produce technical or professional writing projects for nonprofit or government organizations as their community service. In "Service-Learning as a Path to Virtue: The Ideal Orator in Professional Communication," James Dubinsky offers an exception to this model, discussing his shift from having students write "for clients" to having them write "with partners" (69).

Huckin, along with Leigh Henson and Kristene Sutliff in "A Service-Learning Approach to Business and Technical Writing Instruction," offers the most explicit guidelines for setting up and facilitating service-learning projects. Among other things, Huckin advises teachers to choose relatively technical projects (e.g., manuals or websites rather than newsletters or brochures) and to ensure that students have adequate agency support (53). Henson and Sutliff offer more background about service-learning in higher education before focusing on instructional strategies for collaborative writing. They also raise the important issue of course level, arguing that advanced rather than introductory technical writing courses are better suited for service-learning because students will already have knowledge of rhetoric and workplace writing conventions (193). Technical writing programs with a multiple course sequence might also experiment with service-learning projects that enable students to revise and track their work over this sequence.

In "Integrating Service Learning and Technical Communication: Benefits and Challenges," Catherine Matthews and Beverly Zimmerman base their practical pedagogical advice on a qualitative study of students' reactions to service-learning in an advanced technical communication course. Their study largely confirmed the widespread claims that service-learning enhances students' academic learning, motivation, and development of civic values, though they provide mostly anecdotal evidence as support. Matthews and Zimmerman also point to several challenges for students, including forming community partnerships and struggling with organizational and team roles, before recommending ways to better prepare students, organizations, and teachers.

> Sapp and Crabtree argue service-learning can serve as a "companion laboratory in citizenship" that teaches students "how to serve others and how to be socially responsible."

Other articles seem to focus less on pragmatic aspects of service-learning than on students' civic development. Expanding the work of Carolyn Miller and Thomas Miller, Dubinsky grounds service-learning in classical rhetoric's emphasis on civic participation with a moral purpose (61-62). He then contrasts his previous version of a service-learning professional writing course, which emphasized vocational training, with his revised version, which emphasizesd civic praxis. In addition to attending to the practical production of professional documents for organizations, the students in Dubinsky's revised course critically reflect on their relationships with community stakeholders and work toward making these relationships more reciprocal (69-70).

Another article that focuses on students' civic development is "A Laboratory in Citizenship" by David Sapp and Robbin Crabtree. Just as internships and real-world writing assignments can serve as "laboratories" for the profession, Sapp and Crabtree argue, service-learning can serve as a "companion laboratory in citizenship" that teaches students "how to serve others and how to be socially responsible" (412, 413). Sapp and Crabtree then discuss three sample projects in which students critically reflected about "the role of social service agencies in the community and the underlying social problems they address" (421). Students even produced written reports about the social problems being addressed. Although the authors' sample projects are compelling in

their approaches to reflection, they don't show *how* students can form partnerships with members of their agency and other community stakeholders; in one project, students had little direct contact with the sponsoring agency (423).

The five articles just discussed highlight the centrality of several concerns for the continuing growth of high-quality service-learning in technical and professional communication: 1) building reciprocal, sustained community partnerships, 2) developing robust approaches to reflection, and 3) assessing how well models of service-learning achieve their objectives.

Although I believe that various forms of service-learning are worthwhile, I hope more teachers will follow Dubinsky's lead in shifting to a model of writing with the community. Such a model could be grounded in classical rhetorical theory, as Dubinsky illustrates, in theories of user engagement (see Johnson; Salvo), or in the notion of intercultural inquiry developed by Linda Flower and colleagues (see Deans; Flower; Scott). As Flower, Long, and Higgins explain it, intercultural inquiry involves inviting those people most affected by a community problem to offer their "culturally different perspectives to collaboratively construct new readings of the problem and stronger (rival) hypotheses about the best response to it" (72). In addition to viewing their sponsoring agencies as partners, students might need to invite both the partiarticipation of and feedback from other project stakeholders, such as the agencies' clients. Beyond ensuring that students choose projects that enable them to engage various stakeholders (e.g., projects without confidentiality concerns), we as teachers could help students adapt usability strategies to their projects and apply them early on.

> **Intercultural inquiry involves inviting those people most affected by a community problem to offer their "culturally different perspectives to collaboratively construct new readings of the problem and stronger (rival) hypotheses about the best response to it."**

Service-learning's sustainability is a related issue that a few teachers have begun to address. To better position students to make sustainable contributions to organizations, Matthews and Zimmerman suggest that students "spend time working in the organization in addition to writing and designing a document" (399). Students could also analyze the discourse and organizational

culture of their sponsors as part of their project invention. Sapp and Crabtree propose a more promising way to foster sustainability: the teacher could "develop long-term relationships with the cosponsoring organizations" (426). Teachers could work with organizations to develop long-term projects or a series of related projects that several successive classes could take on, each group building on the work of the previous one. Sapp and Crabtree also encourage teachers to collaborate with organizations in "longitudinal community-based research" and/or otherwise get involved in the organizations themselves (426). Such research, which could focus, say, on assessment, could help teachers and students ensure that their work is ongoing, integrated, and responsive to community concerns (see Cushman). "Service learning programs that have sustained themselves," argues Cushman, "have incorporated reciprocity and risk taking that can best be achieved when the researcher [or teacher] views the site as a place for teaching, research, and service—as a place for collaborative inquiry—with the students and community partners" (43).

Many of us see reflection as one of the more perplexing components of service-learning, and this is evident in the relatively little space that most of the abovementioned authors dedicate to the subject. Several scholars have critiqued the common practice of assigning reflection in journals or logs, arguing that such practice rarely leads to critical thinking and can encourage students to view their work in the community narrowly as charity and/or as a journey of personal discovery (Anson; Herzberg). One of the major challenges we face as teachers of service-learning is to ensure that reflection is grounded in critical civic (rather than personal) deliberation and tied to ethical civic action.

> **One of the major challenges we face as teachers of service-learning is to ensure that reflection is grounded in critical (rather than personal) civic deliberation and tied to ethical civic action.**

We can begin to do this by asking students to critique, as Dubinsky does, the larger sociopolitical exigencies faced by their sponsoring organizations and the people served by these organizations (70). Huckin, Henson and Sutliff, and Sapp and Crabtree similarly ask students to interrogate the social conditions that created the need for their organizations in the first place. Donna Bickford and Nedra Reynolds propose replacing the question, "How can we help these people?" with the harder, deeper question, "Why are conditions this way?" (231).

Ideally, this kind of structural analysis would start at the beginning of the course, perhaps as students negotiate their project proposals. In their article "Activism and Service Learning," Bickford and Reynolds explain how such analysis could lead to more open-ended projects that feature "acts of dissent," such as a letter-writing campaign or a public protest (247). Even if technical and professional writing teachers don't adopt Bickford and Reynolds' more radical pedagogy, they can push students to transform their critical reflection into rhetorical acts calling for institutional or social change (see also Porter et al).

For some teachers, especially those new to service-learning, the logistical and rhetorical demands of this pedagogy can work like crabgrass to smother the critical component of reflection. It's easy to relegate reflection to project management exercises or postpone it until the end of the course. Dubinsky, in his previous version of service-learning, and Louise Rehling, in her service-learning internship, assign final reflection reports, and Huckin facilitates in-class reflection discussions toward the end of the semester. Dubinsky explains that one way to better integrate reflection is to treat students' conduct or service as a major "text" of the course, along with the texts that students produce and readings about the nature of service (69). Students can critique their ongoing relationships with community stakeholders from the problem-defining stage onward. Along the same line, I have discussed ways to transform typical project management assignments—such as the proposal, progress report, and final report—so that they better foster students' ethical critique and civic engagement (Scott).

If we take the civic dimension of service-learning seriously, we will need to assess how service-learning affects students' development of civic values. More importantly, we will need to assess the ongoing civic effects of student projects in the community.

The final issue that I want to mention here is assessment. Many of us already ask sponsoring organizations to formally evaluate student work and ask students to assess their own work (Redd). In their study involving reflection journals, response papers, and interviews, Matthews and Zimmerman demonstrate how we might more systematically assess service-learning's benefits and challenges from students' perspectives. If we take the civic dimension of service-learning seriously, we will need, as Matthews and Zimmerman do, to

assess how service-learning affects students' development of civic values. More importantly, we will need to assess the ongoing civic effects of student projects in the community. Whatever form (e.g., quantitative, qualitative, ethnographic) such assessment takes, it should be based on the criteria and perspectives of various stakeholders. For example, sponsoring organizations may be best suited to evaluating the usefulness of particular documents, but may not always be in the best position to predict the broader civic effects of service-learning projects. The teacher and organization might need to enlist the help of subsequent classes of students to gauge long-term effects.

Collectively, the articles by Huckin, Henson and Sutliff, Matthews and Zimmerman, Dubinsky, and Sapp and Crabtree mark a turning point in the growth of service-learning in our field. Thanks in part to the authors' persuasive appeals and pragmatic and critical insights, ambitious models of service-learning have clearly taken root. We must now invite others to join us in assessing, refining, and expanding on these models.

Works Cited

Anson, Chris M. "On Reflection: The Role of Logs and Journals in Service-Learning Courses." *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition.* Eds. Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters. Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education and NCTE, 1997.167-180.

Bickford, Donna M., and Nedra Reynolds. "Activism and Service-Learning: Reframing Volunteerism as Acts of Dissent." *Pedagogy* 2.2 (Spring 2002): 229-252.

Cushman, Ellen. "Sustainable Service Learning Programs." *College Composition and Communication* 54.1 (September 2002): 40-65.

Deans, Thomas. *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition.* Urbana, IL:NCTE, 2000.

Dubinsky, James M. "Service-Learning as a Path to Virtue: The Ideal Orator in Professional Communication." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 8 (Spring 2002): 61-74.

Flower, Linda. "Intercultural Inquiry and the Transformation of Service." *College English* 65.2 (November 2002): 181-201.

Flower, Linda, Elenore Long, and Lorraine Higgins. *Learning to Rival: A Literate Practice for Intercultural Inquiry.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000.

Henson, Leigh, and Kristene Sutliff. "A Service Learning Approach to Business and

Technical Writing Instruction." *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 28.2 (1998): 189-205.

Herzberg, Bruce. "Community Service and Critical Teaching." *College Composition and Communication* 45.3 (1994): 307-319.

Huckin, Thomas N. "Technical Writing and Community Service." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 11.1 (January 1997): 49-59.

Johnson, Robert R. *User-Centered Technology: A Rhetorical Theory for Computers and Other Mundane Artifacts.* Albany: SUNY Press, 1998.

Matthews, Catherine, and Beverly B. Zimmerman. "Integrating Service Learning and Technical Communication: Benefits and Challenges." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 8.4 (Fall 1999): 383-404.

Miller, Carolyn R. "What's Practical About Technical Writing?" *Technical Writing: Theory and Practice.* Eds. Bertie E. Fearing and W. Keats Sparrow. New York: MLA, 1989. 14-24.

Miller, Thomas P. "Treating Professional Writing as Social Praxis." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 11 (1991): 57-72.

Porter, James E., Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey T. Grabill, and Libby Miles. "Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change." *College Composition and Communication* 51.4 (June 2000): 610-642.

Redd, Theresa. "In the Eye of the Beholder: Contrasting Views of Community Service Writing." *Reflections* 3.1 (Winter 2003): 14-35.

Rehling, Louise. "Doing Good While Doing Well: Service-Learning Internships." *Business Communication Quarterly* 63.1 (March 2000): 77-89.

Salvo, Michael J. "Ethics of Engagement: User-Centered Design and Rhetorical Methodology." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 10.3 (2001): 273-290.

Sapp, David Alan, and Robbin D. Crabtree. "A Laboratory in Citizenship: Service Learning in the Technical Communication Classroom." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 11.4 (Fall 2002): 411-431.

Scott, J. Blake. "Rearticulating Civic Engagement through Service-Learning and Cultural Studies." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 13.3 (2004): 289-306.

Blake Scott is assistant professor of English at the University of Central Florida, where he teaches courses in technical and professional communication and the rhetorics of science and medicine. He is co-author, with Melody Bowdon, of *Service-Learning in Technical and Professional Communication.* His recent teaching and research focus on developing models of service-learning that draw on cultural studies and usability theory.