Cultivating Democratic Sensibility by Working with For-Profit Organizations: An Alternative Perspective on Service-Learning

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Drawing on the work of experiential learning experts such as John Dewey to show that one of the foundational objectives of service-learning is to encourage civic engagement, this article argues that students who undertake work in a business environment can develop a strong sense of their roles as citizens. It offers a case study of a workplace communication course to argue that experiential learning in for-profit companies has the potential to allow students to both participate in and critique corporate cultures, learning to act ethically, responsibly and democratically as agents of change.

As David Sapp and Robbin Crabtree note in their recent *Technical Communication Quarterly* article, service-learning in technical communication programs provides students with experiences that "include relevant and meaningful service with the community, enhanced academic learning in coursework, and purposeful civic learning that directly and intentionally prepares students for active civic participation in a diverse democratic society" (413). This position on service-learning echoes Bettina Lankard, Thomas Deans, and others (Saltmarsh; Giles and Eyler; Morton and Saltmarsh; Hatcher), who remind us that service-learning stems from the Progressive Education era and John Dewey's influence in particular. Just as the Progressives tried to connect schools to society, many technical

communication programs strive to prepare students for workplace and civic arenas. We want our students to connect academic work to "real" life; we want our students to collaborate; we want our students to learn by doing— all outcomes supported by service-learning.

Many technical communication students who participate in active learning outside of the classroom collaborate with for-profit companies. Given our field's close ties to the for-profit sector, our goal of preparing students for the work world, and our equally strong commitment to promoting ethical action in the workplace, we might ask, What happens when we adapt the paradigm of service-learning as it is typically understood—pedagogy that serves non-profit organizations and promotes civic and ethical understandings—to the types of for-profit companies that employ most technical communicators?

On the surface, it would appear that we are not promoting civic engagement in the same way, since for-profits have a different set of values from non-profits. For many, the corporate business environment appears the antithesis of a democratic community, a climate ill-suited to encourage a democratic ethos or generate a social conscience. In some regards, corporate America appears to be a kind of anti-democracy, a private sector flourishing through a hierarchical structure where a minority group of predominantly white upper management elites benefits from the work of a majority group of laborers. Women and people of color are often underrepresented in upper levels of corporate organizations, and the corporate workplace does not generally reflect a multicultural ethos. Rather, corporate ethos, one might argue, focuses more on profitability than on equality, rewarding individualist initiatives that promote profit and goals of the company rather than the good of the majority of employees or community well-being.

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However, for-profit experiential learning may provide one approach to what Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorna see as "the challenge of revitalizing our national community" (20). In their analysis of American civic engagement, Skocpol and Fiorna discuss the need for "Americans to look long and hard at

issues of power and inequality--matters that have always been at the heart of choice and contention in the world's first, most vibrant, and most enduring democracy" (20). Ironically, they point out, although "American civil society and democracy may have become more flexible and open than ever before … the United States at the dawn of a new millennium may, nevertheless, be evolving into a system organized and directed by and for the most privileged of its citizens" (20). This position becomes particularly alarming when we consider that the majority of Americans now define their primary community as the work environment rather than the local geographic community, identifying primarily with the values proffered by employers (Cheney 158).

Yet, if a technical communication course that serves a for-profit company is theoretically and critically aware in the ways that conventional service-learning is, might it not be possible to teach some of the same concepts of civic engagement as we teach in service-learning courses? Isn't it possible to help students cultivate a sense of meaningful participation in a social organization (the workplace) at the same time that our courses help them develop the technical and rhetorical skills needed to succeed in the workplace? We address these questions below, first by outlining our perspective of what characterizes service-learning. Next, using an approach similar to Elizabeth Ervin's narrative reconstruction of her service-learning course in "Encouraging Civic Participation among First-Year Writing Students," we demonstrate our approach to working with a for-profit client through an anecdotal case study. Using examples of student work and course materials woven together with our own analysis and reflection on the anecdotal case. This article presents some of the concepts that we imagine would characterize a successful for-profit model as a step toward—we hope—creating possibilities for community revitalization and civic engagement. We hope, that is, through productive and challenging interactions with the for-profit sector, to encourage other technical writing teachers to become in some small way what Ellen Cushman describes as "agents of social change outside the university" ("Rhetorician" 7).

A Perspective on Service-Learning
In order to help students as well as professors think through how they might become such agents of change, most experiential learning courses, and service-learning courses in particular, involve projects with nonprofit and community organizations such as homeless shelters, literacy organizations,

and after-school tutoring programs. Through engagement with these organizations, students develop rhetorical and technical skills while also providing services to the community. Bruce Herzberg and Paul Heilker outline useful models for such projects, accompanied by principles for course development. Herzberg, for example, describes a service-learning course in which students read about literacy, become literacy tutors at a Boston shelter, and then write about their experiences. In Herzberg's courses, "students study literacy and schooling and write about that" (59). Such projects help students become more informed about social problems, multicultural issues, and the needs of disenfranchised members of their communities.

Socially conscious and community driven, Heilker's projects support the Stanford model of service-learning that "enables students to understand writing as social action" (74). In Heilker's course, students complete "real tasks" for "real audiences" and "real purposes," writing newsletters, brochures, or lobbying materials for nonprofit organizations (75,72). Similarly, in *Service-Learning in Technical and Professional Communication*, Melody Bowdon and J. Blake Scott advocate the Stanford approach, a paradigm that situates "writing technical or professional documents as service" (5). The Stanford model emphasizes that "service-learning isn't an extra assignment tacked on to course requirements; it is a set of meaningful learning experiences that lets students see academic concepts in action" (Bowdon and Scott 5).

Bowdon and Scott outline four guidelines for service-learning projects in technical communication courses that can also apply to experiential learning in general:

1. Service-learning relates directly to course goals.
2. Service-learning addresses a need in the community.
3. Service-learning involves developing reciprocal relationships between the college or university and the communities in which it is embedded.
4. Service-learning involves critical reflection on the student's part.

Echoing Dewey, these guidelines suggest that experiential learning projects should provide real world contexts in which students can develop rhetorical skills while also connecting academics to communities and considering relationships with their fellow citizens. As Herzberg argues, service-learning may

help students "generate a social conscience" because such projects create an opportunity for "understand[ing] a sense of the reality and immediacy of the problems of the poor and homeless along with a belief that people in a position to help out should do so" (58). Service-learning, then, provides a foundation for students to think of themselves not only as students but also as citizens participating in a community.

Because students are responsible to a client external to the classroom, the quality of students' work in experiential learning courses. That is, as students strive to address a real exigency in the community and meet their clients' expectations, their work assumes new significance for them as writers. The exigencies of experiential learning immerse students in real-life situations, requiring students to work collaboratively to solve difficult problems. Students usually rise to the challenge of these situations by collaboratively producing sophisticated communication pieces. As Stephen Fishman suggests, Dewey who would have supported such kinds of cooperative learning, emphasized cooperation and believed that "no one works on his or her own" (Fishman 317). Instead, Dewey's goal for education focused on the development of "individual skills not for selfish use but for the common good" (Fishman 317). Dewey saw teamwork as a valuable tool for democratization because to participate successfully in a group, students must learn how to listen to and respect others' views and opinions. These kinds of rhetorical skills are vital to democratic participation because as citizens in a community, people have to listen to and respect each other.

Experiential learning pedagogies also contribute to what Robert Putnam, discusses as "social capital," which "refers to features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (67) . In his examination of the decline in Americans' civic involvement, Putnam correlates the presence of social capital with thriving communities. In these communities, social connections foster "networks of interaction" where participants often think in terms of "we," and "incentives for opportunism are reduced" (67). Because "social connections and civic engagement pervasively influence our public life, as well as our private prospects," Putnam questions how to "reverse these adverse trends in social connectedness, thus restoring civic engagement and civic trust" (65, 77). The recent popularity of service-learning and other types of experiential

learning pedagogies provides one answer to Putnam's query, allowing people to make "connections in an era that seems to be full of forces of disconnection . . . bringing people together with positive common causes and collective tasks that foster communication and social bonds" (Adler-Kassner et al. 3-4).

In sum, experiential learning helps students develop technical and rhetorical skills by asking them to collaborate as they solve complex communication problems that result from real needs, most often those of nonprofit organizations. As students collaborate with each other to solve these problems, they also build relationships with their peers and communities; they make connections and create foundations for civic involvement. When students reflect on these connections and experiences, they also enhance their ability to think critically. In the words of Herzberg, students may "generate a social conscience," prompting them to reconsider their roles in the academy and community, their responsibilities to fellow citizens, and the possibilities to affect community improvement. But the reflection doesn't end with analysis; it results in action as students begin to see themselves and their work as agents of change.

Re-imagining Experiential Learning for Technical Communication

Given this perspective on experiential learning, its goals, its outcomes, and its values, how does the pedagogy apply when the clients are no longer the disenfranchised, the poor, or those whom we traditionally view as requiring help? What happens when we translate experiential learning into a context of privilege and power, when we take our students into the corporations where most of them ultimately will work? These questions are especially provocative in American culture today because as George Cheney so eloquently summarizes the situation in his article, "Democracy in the Workplace,"

> Surely one of the greatest ironies of the modern world is that democracy, imperfect as it is in the political realm, seldom extends to the workplace. In fact, most U.S. citizens do not even question the fact that they are required to "check their voice at the door" of the shop or office. (167-68)

We might find, as Cheney's position above predicts, that the organizations most likely to employ our students after graduation are perhaps more in need

of assistance in arenas related to balancing individual needs and rights with corporate goals than our nonprofit partners are. We might find that re-imagining experiential learning within the context of for-profit organizations will not only help our students succeed in their workplaces, since students will learn valuable technical skills, but that projects in the for-profit sector may also help our students re-imagine their values and workplace communities, especially if we emphasize the possibility of building more democratic workplaces. The challenge in working with for-profit companies, as the case that follows shows, is to help students walk the line between meeting the profit-driven and efficiency-motivated demands of corporate America, maintaining a critical distance from an organization's culture—a distance that allows them to see and act on opportunities for democratization if those opportunities arise within the companies they serve.

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English 856, "Workplace Communication" as an Example of Working with For-profits

Clemson University's English 856, "Workplace Communication," focuses on principles of communication in organizations, such as how to manage communication processes, how to implement communications programs, and how communication impacts organizational culture. In the last three years, the course has also been an experiential learning course that solicits client projects from for-profit organizations. The clients have ranged from a small single-owner business to an extremely large, international engineering firm. The nature of the tasks the clients wish the class to complete varies, but usually the clients desire some sort of communications audit with a recommendation and implementation plan for changes. Ordinarily, three projects occupy the class of twelve first-year Master's students, with the class breaking into three teams of four members to complete a specific project. The course has three divisions that draw upon but reframe slightly Bowdon and Scott's recommendations for structuring a service-learning course (5-6):

> 1) A four-week preparation phase where students build foundational knowledge of course content. The content focuses on

models of studying organizational communication, including systems theories (cf. Weick; Monge), cultural theories (c.f. Goodall; Eisenberg and Riley) and critical approaches (cf. Trethewey; Deetzand Mumby). As the final preparatory stage for the project, students complete an annotated bibliography on topics related to their particular context. For example, students working with an engineering firm on electronic collaboration would develop a bibliography on both communication in engineering firms as well as electronic collaboration.

2) A ten-week experiential learning phase where students begin to put their knowledge into action. Students consult extensively with the clients to develop a detailed research plan that addresses client's needs and outlines the scope of the project. The students then execute that research plan, analyze the data, and ultimately craft a recommendation report and implementation materials, delivering these materials both orally and in writing to the client.

3) A two-week reflection phase follows the submission of the final client report in which students attempt to distance themselves from the project. Students examine the learning that took place, identifying spaces for improvement in their own team processes, and articulating opportunities realized and opportunities lost for their individual, intellectual, and professional growth. In this "post mortem," students comment on the project, assess their individual contributions to the project as well as the work of their peers, and draw conclusions about the nature of workplace culture as exemplified in their experiences.

In spring of 2003, the Workplace Communication class undertook a project with Southern Phone (a pseudonym), a "baby Bell" located in the Southeastern United States. Comprised of over 1000 employees, Southern Phone has a presence in six states and has received awards for technological innovations, customer service, and contributions to the local communities where its facilities are located. Clemson University's Master of Arts in Professional Communication (MAPC) Program has placed several interns at Southern Phone in various capacities including instructional design, usability, and intranet design, and Southern Phone has participated in several class projects with the MAPC program, so this particular course expanded an existing reciprocal relationship.

During the spring 2003 semester, Southern Phone collaborated with the Workplace Communication course on a project to assess the effectiveness and usability of a third-party knowledge management system. The company had purchased a two-year, limited license to use the knowledge management system for pilot testing within the training and sales group. Pending the outcome of the class's study, the company would decide whether or not to roll out the system to the entire corporation. Southern Phone charged the class with the following tasks:

- Analyze the usability of the knowledge management system.
- Ascertain the system's return on investment.
- Recommend improvements that could be built into the system within the system's design specifications (since it was an externally developed package).
- Recommend whether or not the system should be implemented company wide.
- Sketch a framework for implementation if the system performed favorably on the first and second measures.

It remained for the student group to determine how best to meet these objectives within the framework of the course. Southern Phone's requests were obviously motivated by for-profit motives such as efficiency and return on investment; thus, the project with Southern Phone provided students with a real context in which to develop their technical, rhetorical, and research skills as they sought to observe and ultimately recommend action for the company based upon the parameters the company identified.

Throughout the course, students also realized Dewey's call for education to provide both individual and collaborative work since each four-student group was accountable for the ultimate outcome of the project that they undertook. As a group, the members decided that their research methodologies would involve observations, interviews, surveys, heuristic usability testing, and benchmarking of similar systems in other organizations. As a group, they also coded an almost unmanageable amount of cultural data that these methodologies generated, discovering trends in the company's practices that contributed to the ineffective use of the knowledge management tool. Finally they presented their findings and recommendations to Southern Phone in a meeting attended by several high-ranking members of Southern Phone's management.

As individuals, however, each group member implemented specific pieces of the research plan. One student authored the interview questions and surveys; another student conducted the usability testing and benchmarking of the system; each of the students separately interviewed multiple employees; each member scheduled specific times to observe the employees at Southern Phone, attend meetings, and participate in conference calls. Individually, each student spent between 30 and 40 hours over a ten-week period on site at Southern Phone's local office conducting research. When the final report was being prepared, each student also assumed accountability for a particular section, and, when the report was presented orally, each student spoke on a different part of the report: one opened and outlined the context; another spoke about findings; a third student addressed recommendations and proposed an implementation plan. The instructor participated as an audience member during the question and answer session following the presentation.

However, and very importantly, meeting the instrumental needs of Southern Phone represented only one part of the course requirements. As the assignment below shows, students were challenged to investigate cultural issues at Southern Phone and propose suggestions for positive interventions, working toward cultural change. A segment of the assignment reads as follows:

> **Objectives of the Study**
> The objectives of the study mirror the things we have learned so far in this class. Your research should seek to answer specific questions that will guide your data collection and therefore give the information to "understand" or "identify" things within your organization that can be improved—both according to the client needs and according to principles of a democratic workplace. Your research objectives, then, break down into three areas that you will need to address in the final written and oral reports:
> - Systems analysis observations and recommendations
> - Cultural analysis observations and recommendations
> - Critical analysis observations and recommendations
>
> One word of caution: Generally, companies aren't used to being critiqued for their cultural practices so be mindful of your critiques, and make sure to suggest opportunities for positive action rather than criticizing the client in your reports.

This desire to work toward cultural change from within an organization might be the most distinguishing feature of working with for-profits to build democratic sensibility. Based on James Berlin's poststructuralist approach that promotes critical inquiry and simultaneous active participation in a culture, this class combined relevant cultural research and reading assignments in the beginning weeks of the class; situated research opportunities onsite at Southern Phone; produced instrumental writing to create the recommendation report; and generated reflective writing to evaluate the context of the study.

Specifically, following Berlin, this class explored how postmodern theory and classroom practices can merge, resulting in a "postmodern rhetorical theory" that could become "an ally in our work of creating a critically literate citizenry" (Berlin 17, 32). Like Berlin's model class where students "research their own language, their own society, their own learning, examining the values inscribed in them and the way these values are shaping their subjectivities" (26), the students in the Workplace Communication class were challenged to identify "socially constructed narrative codes," which include key terms arranged in binary hierarchies. The class examined these binary hierarchies, which privilege one term or concept over another, and discovered how such hierarchies within "culturally coded stories" suggested "patterns of appropriate behavior" (Berlin 28). Ultimately, students began to see that these hierarchies and cultural narratives "are ideologically invested . . . with recommended economic, social, and political arrangements" (Berlin 29).

Ordinarily in experiential learning work for for-profit organizations, students are expected to work, not to critique the organization, or to recommend ways that the company itself can become more democratic at the same time they work to improve the company's bottom line. One unique requirement of the workplace communication class, though, was to examine power issues, values, and cultural practices especially as they impacted the success of the knowledge management tool under consideration. In other words, the students were required to assess Southern Phone's culture and how that culture interacted with the success or failure of the knowledge management system under scrutiny in the project. Most importantly—students were also expected to act in ways that might redress inequities in the workplace if inequities or non-democratic practices became visible.

After examining the stories, behaviors, and binaries that existed in Southern Phone, students found much to critique, especially the "knowledge silos" or the tendency to hoard information in order to make an individual or group appear powerful by controlling access to particular pieces of information. In the case of Southern Phone, the organization's management promoted such knowledge silos by hoarding information themselves while at the same time expecting the company as a whole to openly share information across hierarchical and operational divisions. The conflict between management's expectations and practices certainly is not new in corporations. However, most experiential learning projects wouldn't make this discrepancy visible to the client as an example of a cultural practice that impedes company efficiency. The students in this project, drawing on their readings from Foucault (*Discipline and Punish*), Goodall (*Casing the Promised Land*), Faber ("Intuitive Ethics"), and Trethewey ("Cultured Bodies"), all of whom echo Berlin in their treatment of culture, crafted an understanding of the relationships among cultural practices, ethical exercise of power, and corporate efficiency; their final recommendations included passages such as this one that tactfully critiques the organization as well as suggests positive action:

> Over the course of the study, we uncovered some additional problems within Southern Phone: 1) a number of partners are uncertain about the job functions of [department name] and [knowledge management system name] because the current communication processes do not allow for effective distribution and sharing of knowledge across hierarchical lines resulting in "data islands" guarded by managers at the expense of their employees; 2) Partners feel that they lack adequate recognition and compensation for the work they have performed ….

> In order to solve [these two problems],we recommend that managers be more forthcoming with partners about job-related information by implementing a formalized documentation and accountability system that tracks the dissemination, implementation, and movement of knowledge across levels of [Southern Phone]. We also propose that time and resources be allotted monthly to adequately inform, recognize, and reward [Trainers] for the work they complete.

The students were lucky enough to see the company implement some of their recommendations. Specifically, approximately two months after the completion of the course, Southern Phone did implement the class's recommendation that a cadre of training associates, and not just corporate management, be sent to the knowledge management system's week-long training course to learn about the system. The group of associates that Southern Phone sent to training have now become the basis for a "train the trainer" system in which education about the system comes from the very users themselves. By successfully recommending this distributed model of knowledge access and training that starts at low levels and actually percolates up to management, and ultimately seeing it implemented after the conclusion of the course, the students didn't just diagnose problems. They acted as agents of change within the company by simultaneously showing that they valued the company's efficiency motives at the same time that they sought to democratize the corporate culture.

Finally, in addition to recommending ways to improve practices at Southern Phone, students reflected individually on the experience and how they had grown as communicators as a result of the project. Reflective assignments, a key element in helping students develop this democratic sensibility, allow opportunities for exploration, social and cognitive development, and closure. Students discussed and evaluated the semester's project, the skills acquired, and their collaborative work experiences. They considered how their work and the knowledge gained from it relate to their lives outside the classroom. Because the course's research and reporting phases extended beyond the time scheduled, the very critical element of reflection was abbreviated to only one class discussion. However, during this class discussion, a number of students astutely observed that if they hadn't been outsiders they never would have been able to locate sites of functional improvement in the organization. Additionally, had they not participated in the organization's daily functions, tasting the culture in small bites, they could not have spoken intelligently about the culture's role in the organization and ways it might be more democratically aware.

In the reflective discussion, students echoed Steven B. Katz's important point in his article "The Ethic of Expediency" about the importance of humanizing subjects, of treating people as ends in themselves rather then seeing them as objects. Katz writes that, "the ethos of technology...is expediency: rationality,

efficiency, speed productivity, power" (266). And while Southern Phone's antidemocratic practices cannot even be compared to the horrors of the Holocaust, students recognized the same thinking, the over reliance on expediency, in operation at Southern Phone. As a result of this recognition, the students acknowledged that had the project simply adhered to the classical or "scientific" management paradigm that focuses on working toward efficiency without consideration of democratic practices, they would have overlooked the potential for democratic improvement that accompanies employee empowerment. They would have simply worked toward recommendations that centered on bottom-line concerns and efficiency rather than thinking about ways to engage employees from across the hierarchy in the management of the company.

The students also observed, however, that they did focus enough on the efficiency issues to gain the trust of the management. The students demonstrated to the management that they did, in fact, have the company's best interest in mind by contextualizing their critiques and consequent recommendations in ways that positively impacted the company's use of the knowledge management tool. Concurrently, though, because the students were outsiders charged by the course's requirements with examining the organization from a critical theory perspective , they maintained a distance that allowed them to uncover several sites for improving the culture of Southern Phone (the "knowledge silos" example above is one of three significant examples the project uncovered). Ironically, as the students observed, it was this dual position of experiencing a small piece of the culture from the inside yet remaining outside "consultants" that gave students the ability to critique the company even as they recommended methods for improving its efficiency. Had the students simply been outsiders, their critiques would have been dismissed as "merely academic" or worse. Had the students simply been insiders, their recommendations would have focused merely on efficiency. Although many students were unable in eight weeks to build this sophisticated understanding about the complex role culture plays in the workplace, there were several who successfully re-evaluated their understanding of a corporate culture and its role in promoting both democratic sensibility as well as efficient practices.

Reflections on Experiential Learning with For-Profit Organizations
Perhaps, based upon the success of the Southern Phone project and how

students formed an understanding both of corporate culture and how they might impact it, we might answer our opening questions by suggesting that yes, for-profit experiential learning projects can help students cultivate a sense of meaningful participation in a social organization at the same time that they help students develop the technical and rhetorical skills needed to succeed in the workplace. Both occurred on some level in the Southern Phone case. In the case of Southern Phone, the Workplace Communication course has actually contributed to cultural change since the company has hired several interns from the course and in fall of 2003 hired a member of the student group as a full-time employee to oversee the implementation of many of the changes the student group recommended. Not only do we see Southern Phone implementing the changes that the students recommended, but we also see that the company values the type of perspective that the students bring enough to invite one of the students into the organization. The corporation identified the student with the prospect of positive change and asked that student to become an advocate for positive change within Southern Phone.

Experiential learning within a for-profit context, then, provides our students with valuable experience because the majority of our students will ultimately inhabit the workforce they serve in these projects, not simply act as temporary fixtures who disappear at the end of the project. For example, while the students from the workplace communication course haven't all gone to work for Southern Phone, a handful have over the last three years and, as a result, the work they began in their projects continues through their employment. More important, one would hope that students apply the models of critique they learned in this course wherever they accept jobs after graduation and thereby, hopefully, spread democratic sensibility across a multitude of organizations. Working with a for-profit, it would appear, can provide an authentic context for building "marketable skills" as well as supplying opportunities to develop students' critical thinking skills and, ideally, to inspire cultural change. Students begin to see that they can positively influence large organizations through small, local improvements, like the training program the students in the course recommended to Southern Phone.

However, even though the Southern Phone project was successful because students made positive contributions to an organization's culture at the same time that they developed critical awareness about power relationships and

workplace democracy, working with the for-profit sector on experiential learning also gives rise to some concerns. Specifically, the other projects that were conducted during this same semester did not provide students with the same level of insight into corporate culture and did not open up similar opportunities to make a positive contribution. One project with a local theater, for example, required the student group more or less to develop some marketing materials and to provide the theater with a plan to enlarge their market share by utilizing the materials the students provided. In this case, students resembled interns whose job was to do the will of the organization without working toward any significant change within the organization itself. Certainly the marketing plan and materials were ethical and considered diverse populations, but this is not the same as suggesting to the theater itself ways to improve its own culture.

The second project in the same semester addressed communication gaps within an international group of a large engineering firm. In this case, the corporate partner did, in fact, desire to improve itself through implementing more horizontal communication among its internationally distributed employees. Paradoxically, the group was already relatively democratic, especially in comparison to the rigidly hierarchical parent company, and the most significant opportunities for change were mostly functional. The students in this group, however, had little access to the actual functioning of the group since it was internationally distributed. This problem was compounded by the highly secretive nature of the projects the group completed. In other words, while the students understood that their task was to suggest ways to improve horizontal communication within the group that would ultimately lead to functional gains, they did not have access to most of the current communication practices. They could observe only very limited pieces of communication and could not access any written or intranet-based data, so the student recommendations were superficial and were therefore dismissed by the client during the final presentation.

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That two of three projects were relatively unsuccessful in this same semester certainly forces us to ask whether or not the approach used in the Workplace Communication class actually works. Can a teacher actually engineer the successes that occurred at Southern Phone, or does the teacher have to hope that a specific organization is "ripe" for the type of work that combines critical inquiry with instrumental improvement? The answer is complicated because as R. Stanley Dicks suggests, academics and industry have different cultures. One of the major cultural differences Dicks cites between the "academic" focus on critical inquiry and democracy and "industry's" focus on instrumentalism and productivity centers on the role of power. Specifically, he argues, academics are suspicious of power and prefer to have power distributed throughout a bureaucratic system. As a result, academics encourage similar beliefs in our students. By comparison, "although businesses are beginning to work more on collaborative models, power is still concentrated in a group of managers" (20). As a result, industry continues to reward those who show that they directly and concretely improve the business's products or bottom line. Dicks concludes that clearly there is a disjunction between academics and the workplace and that working between them "can be like traveling between countries" (23). Based upon Dicks' assessment, then, we might find it difficult to see the Workplace Communication course as a success.

However, rather than dwell on the course's shortcomings, the bit of success it does represent can hearten us and might possibly encourage us to venture across the academy/industry split more frequently. After all it's only through frequent contact that understanding can be built. And as Ann Blakeslee argues in "Researching the Common Ground: Exploring the Space Where Workplace and Academic Cultures Meet," we need to work more in this fertile space. Doing so, she suggests, "could serve as one means of bringing the concerns of academia and the workplace closer together" (41). Although Blakeslee's point here specifically concerns researching this shared space, the implications for the practice of crossing boundaries are equally significant. If, through our student projects, we can persuade for-profit organizations that, for example, workplace democracy is not only a good thing for the simple reason that it's democratic but also because it might lead to significant functional gains, perhaps we'd see more successes than failures in working with for-profit clients. Perhaps basing our democratic recommendations on workplace findings such as those Holtzhausen presents in her article, "The Effects

of Workplace Democracy on Employee Communication Behavior: Implications for Competitive Advantage," could persuade our clients that students' "academic" perspective is actually more practical than the organizations might have otherwise believed. Perhaps we can even utilize research like Holtzhausen's to persuade our own students that they have more to offer corporate partners than simply a cheap source of labor.

Perhaps, if as teachers we can be heartened by successes such as Southern Phone and learn by comparing its successes to the limitations of similarly conceived projects such as the two noted above, we can see an increase in organizations "ripe" for democratic change. Simply standing apart from organizations and critiquing them will not effect change in the same way that actively collaborating with them will. Working with for-profits, then, might be a mandate for those who desire to achieve democratic reform in workplace cultures because it's only through active contact and mutual education that we will see companies begin to value the type of self-critical awareness that in some ways we hoped to foster at Southern Phone.

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Conclusions

"The bottom line for democratic education is empowerment, not simply employment" (Bastian et al. 83). We need to imagine that we are placing students into these experimental situations in order to help them grow as individuals, workers, AND citizens. Experiential learning in for-profit companies has the exciting potential to allow students to participate in corporate cultures at the same time that they develop critical distance from those structures. Students become empowered to critique the problems that exist in corporate cultures by participating in these organizations. The trick is helping students to develop habits of mind that permit them to separate success from significance. Success is not a bad thing when coupled with appropriate ethical considerations. In technical communication, we want to encourage our students to succeed. But even as our students learn skills to help them succeed, our job is to help them think beyond success to the significance of their participation in the workplace and within the larger community and democracy. While

working in a large corporate environment may not seem to carry much signif-
icance, if employees hold ethical considerations in the forefront of all the
work they do, then certainly they can claim to be working toward improving
society, at least on the microcosmic level of their organization's culture. And
just as service-learning in conventional settings helps students develop aware-
ness about inequity as well as an ability to critique and begin to redress it,
experiential learning in for-profit companies offers similar preparation. We
position students in paradoxical and ethically muddy fields of activity similar
to the ones that they will most often encounter in the work world and ask
them to act as ethically, responsibly, and democratically as possible as they
solve complex problems that help improve the bottom line of their employers.
Herein, ultimately, lies the promise of experiential learning in for-profit
organizations: students begin to develop awareness that they can potentially
transform corporate cultures from inside, that they have the opportunity to
improve those cultures by participating in positive ways that draw on an
enhanced sensibility about a business's responsibilities to its employees and its
local community.

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