

The Long-Term Effects of Service-Learning on Composition Students

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Over the last roughly twenty years, or between 2000 and 2019, scholarship on community writing has built upon a focus on service-learning composition courses to include the roles of writing and rhetoric in community engagement more generally, including necessary inquiry into the ethics of community engagement altogether. In this time, the longer-term effects of service-learning writing courses, specifically on college students, have gone unexamined. This study looks at three former students who took service-learning composition courses at the University of Connecticut to determine what, if any, long-term effects the experience had on them. The three former service-learners differ in how they recall their experiences, but they overlap in key places, such as their awareness of rhetoric as social, their commitment to effecting community change, and their belief that the service-learning experience affected them in subtle ways that nonetheless influenced their approaches to community action. This three-participant study, part of a larger project based on retrospective interviews with students formerly enrolled in service-learning courses, shows that such courses may not create dramatic change in students' rhetorical awareness or approach to community action, but the subtle changes they can promise informed the subjects in my study in unexpected ways over time.

Community engagement has enjoyed an increasing and evolving popularity in academia over the past decades. In fact, when Bacon and Roswell opened the first issue of *Reflections on Community-Based Writing Instruction* in 2000, they noted, “In the past fifteen years, American colleges and universities have embraced service-learning with active enthusiasm” (1). This acknowledgement signals that the benefits of community engagement had proven significant enough for writing studies to pursue community engagement in its own way and with its own journal—to be followed by *Community Literacy Journal* in 2006. Today, twenty years later, community engagement in writing studies has resulted in research, pedagogy, community action, a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) position statement, and a biannual conference of its own.¹

An example of this evolution can be found in the pages of *Reflections* itself; early issues focus almost primarily on service-learning, including the risks associated with a pedagogy that, when not mindfully designed and carried out, potentially treat community organizations and members as helpless “recipients” of service and send students the message that they have “done good” without reflecting on the larger social structures that cause inequalities that many community organizations already respond to actively and in an informed way. Over time, and as the field has further explored community engagement, focus has turned somewhat from classroom-based service to include other ways writing scholars can help bridge the gap between the academy and surrounding communities. A cursory glance at *Reflections* over time signals this shift. For example, the term “service-learning” last appeared in a *Reflections* table of contents in Spring of 2017, two years ago, and the term is no longer included in the full title of the journal: *Reflections: A Journal of Community Engaged Writing and Rhetoric*.

Of course, this does not mean that *Reflections* and writing studies in general have abandoned classroom-based community engagement, but scholars such as Herzberg (1997) and Mathieu (2005) have noted the problematic use of the term “service,” which can inspire a sense of half-hearted charity in students and send the message that communities lack their own agency to know what to do for themselves

and how to do it. Therefore, the conversation has necessarily expanded to include more forms of community engagement that need not include students, such as the work of Ellen Cushman (1998, 1999) and Deborah Mutnick² (2016), in which the writing and rhetorical moves of community members—however they define themselves—are the subject of study. Furthermore, recent issues of *Reflections* have included texts about classroom-based community engagement initiatives, though the term “service-learning” itself may not be used (Shumake and Shah 2017; Lindenman 2018). In short, articles about college classroom-based community-oriented pedagogy continue to appear in *Reflections*, though they do so in fewer numbers and with a broader definition of classroom-community partnerships than the term “service-learning” covered in 2000.

But alongside this focal shift in community engagement within writing studies, there has been research into classroom-based service-learning’s long-term effects on students outside of writing studies. For example, Astin, Vogelsong, Ikeda, and Yee (2000) collected longitudinal data from 22,236 undergraduate students from multiple institutions between 1994 and 1998. Their sample included those who took part in service-learning initiatives and those who did not, and Astin et al. found that, among other outcomes, the “[b]enefits associated with course-based service were strongest for the academic outcomes, especially writing skills,” that early service-learning experiences influence students to pursue service-oriented professions, and that some sort of community action in college adds significantly to academic, professional, and personal growth.³

They also found that service-learning, as opposed to other, non-course-based service, tends to benefit academic growth more than professional and/or personal growth, including self-efficacy and leadership, and that these findings depend heavily on the amount of critical reflection included in the activity and the opportunities students have to connect service and course material in service-learning courses. Astin and Vogelsong followed up on this research five years later to show that students and alumni tended to remain socially active after graduation, but that those trends were stronger in the 1990s than they were in the first decade of the 21st century (2005).

More recently, though, Tucker-Loner (2014) tracked college graduates who participated in a service-learning program at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas, presenting case studies of ten former students in Washburn's service-learning program to support her claims that service-learning experiences in college promote social awareness and support the development of professional communication skills. Tucker-Loner's study, though it does not focus on writing specifically, supports Astin et al.'s findings that students make professional choices based on their service experiences, adding that students learn to become more socially active in both personal and professional spheres.

EXIGENCY FOR AND DESCRIPTION OF THIS STUDY

In essence, research into service-learning outside of writing studies has proven fruitful since 2000, and this research is something we could further emulate in writing studies. Even though writing scholars have not yet focused on the longer-term effects of service-learning on students and alumni, many students have taken and continue to take service-learning composition courses, and it is worth examining the effect such classes had on them over time. Wurr (2010) conducted a text-based study on the writing students did in such courses, but since Bacon (1999) and others have reported that students stand to enjoy potential extratextual gains—such as social and ethical ones—a study of students' rhetorical, social, and ethical learning years after their service-learning courses is in order.

Therefore, informed by Tucker-Loner's work, as well as work in writing studies such as longitudinal research by Beaufort (2007) and Sternglass (1997), this article reports on three case studies of current and former UConn students to highlight their service-learning experiences. Each of these students took a service-learning course at the University of Connecticut, and each course fell under Deans' writing *for* the community paradigm (2000, 53), was designed to include critical reflection, and was taught by a faculty member other than me. I began this IRB-approved study by issuing a call for participants to current and former UConn students who had taken a service-learning course in composition. I invited roughly one hundred and fifty students to participate, and thirteen followed up for a one-time, in-person interview. My questions were open-ended because

I wanted respondents to have the chance to share with me details that they saw as significant. For example, I asked about generally memorable aspects of the course rather than specific projects, and I asked what they had to share that was most important to this study so they could make those choices on their own.

I did specifically ask whether participants were still in touch with their community partners and whether or not they were otherwise involved in community action, but again, I allowed respondents plenty of room to decide for themselves what kinds of activities they considered “community action.” Similarly, I avoided specifically asking questions tied to respondents’ identities so as to allow them to decide when the intersections of their identity affected their answers, and I did not ask participants for permission to explicitly share those identity markers in my study aside from asking them to provide a pseudonym and pronouns I could use to refer to them in the study. Of the thirteen interviews, I chose three to include here based on their engagement with the project and because they were examples of students who had taken their courses over the seven years between 2008 to 2015. Again, none of these three respondents had been my students, but I had met one of them, Skai, two years before our interview while we both worked at the University of Connecticut Writing Center.

I present the case studies here using references to existing service-learning/community engagement research to determine how their experiences sync with those of others, and I refer to threshold concepts (Meyer and Land 2003; Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015) throughout to determine if and how these service-learning experiences resulted in learning as measured and defined by current education and writing studies scholarship. These threshold concepts also show how/if this learning was transformative in such a way to be truly long-term learning. Meyers and Land (2003) argue that learning threshold concepts expand knowledge beyond what students can learn from their counterpart: core concepts. While core concepts build a body of necessary conceptual knowledge on a subject, they do not lead to a fundamentally different understanding of that subject. They use the example of the concept of signification in literary and cultural studies. It is troublesome to follow the reasoning from the

core concept of signification to the threshold concept that there are no positive terms because the latter displaces the previously “known” truth that words have concrete meanings in and of themselves. They move on to explain that threshold concepts must have certain characteristics, such as being transformative, (likely) irreversible, integrative insofar as they expose previously hidden relationships, often bounded by conceptual space, and possibly troublesome.

The first case study subject, Michael, had taken his course in the fall of 2008, and by the time of our interview, he had graduated from UConn and moved on to complete a master’s in literature in Chicago. Juneau took his service-learning course in fall of 2012 and by the time of our interview was completing a master’s in biology at UConn and applying to MD/PhD programs. Skai took her course in fall 2015 and at the time of our interview was a UConn senior taking graduate-level courses towards a master’s degree in public health.

THREE CASE STUDIES

Michael

Michael took his service-learning course in fall 2008, graduating from UConn in 2012 with a bachelor’s degree in English. He called his attitude when he arrived at UConn “arrogant,” attributing that arrogance to his belief that writing was transactional and only done for a grade. For Michael, his “point of departure”—the “primary point of reference” he had for himself as a writer as he entered university (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014, 105)—was the mistaken assumption that his previous grades reflected a static and universally applicable writing talent, and his decision to major in English came from his experience in and outside of English courses. For example, he credited his love of reading as well as the discussions in his English classes as two main factors. He also attributed his decision simply to enjoying the larger discourse community of undergraduate English majors outside of the classroom. He pursued that interest to the completion of a master’s degree in literature in Chicago the year after graduating from UConn.

Michael did not recall much about his service-learning course, or at least not the service-learning component of it. He partnered with the No-Freeze Shelter, a homeless shelter in nearby Willimantic,

Connecticut, collaborating with his peers to write brochures for the shelter. And while Michael created public texts, the predominant outcome from his perspective is that he became more of a citizen-writer than he would have had he not taken the class. Indeed, when asked to reflect on the service-learning component of the class, he responded,

I guess, to put it kind of crudely, I'm a lot more leftwing now than I was back then. If you have the ability to write well, you should use writing to improve the station of people who are in some way deprived or suffering or oppressed. And whether you're sort of progressive or just way out in the anarchist zone, I do think that a sort of first-year writing experience that focuses on service-oriented stuff is important, especially because it's also helpful for people who don't want to be English majors. Like if you have to, later on in life write grants, if you have to, later on in life, I don't know, write a newsletter or anything, I think that the, the sort of more outward facing way of teaching is preferable to something else. (Michael)

Tucker-Loner notes that the participants in her study "collectively believed that service-learning leads to a broader sense of community awareness" (2014, 161), and that sense of awareness may be what Michael meant by his being "more leftwing." Michael also echoes Tucker-Loner's findings that students in her study credited service-learning with job opportunities in the future (2014, 159), but he sensed that combining service-learning pedagogy with writing had value insofar as it was, in his words, outward-facing and could make writing process knowledge more readily applicable for non-English majors. It is interesting that Michael credits his service-learning experience with affecting his politics and inspiring political action while he does not seem to recall the particulars of the classroom, including opportunities for reflection. Astin et al. (2000) find that critical reflection is necessary for these gains, but I interviewed Michael ten years after that critical reflection, and the effects in this case outlast the memories of the reflection itself.

Though no longer involved with the No-Freeze Shelter, Michael saw his experience as having shown him the value of social engagement

as a writer and student. In graduate school, for example, he joined a community initiative to bring trauma centers closer to a socio-economically oppressed neighborhood near his campus in Chicago. At the time of our interview, Michael worked for the UConn Health Center, editing promotional and educational documents and teaching summer writing workshops for rising first-year students through UConn Health. Michael opted to share with me his community-based activity out of what seemed like a sense of guilt for not keeping up with his work at the No-Freeze Shelter, but in doing so, he supported Tucker-Loner's finding that exposure to community action in college can lead to both career opportunities (2014, 159) as well as an increased sense of community awareness (2014, 161), as his work since college had been community-oriented.

Michael recalled the influence the attention to writing in the disciplines had on not only his decision of a major but also his writing during and after college. He recalled that peer review changed the transactional value he placed on writing: "exposing anything I write to other people and welcoming their feedback are two things that I value a lot more than when I first started writing as an undergrad." In fact, the sharing of texts with others also made him aware of the value of outward facing texts, which contributed to his more public use of writing as a college graduate for UConn Health, and he was aware of this change. This seems a far cry from the writer who came to UConn so confident that he would be able to write for a grade that he looked back years later to call himself arrogant. It seems as if Michael internalized the threshold concept that "all writers have more to learn" (Rose 2015, 59) over the years since his service-learning class. Indeed, when I asked him what else he would like to share to help me understand his first-year writing experience he added:

I now think that writing should sort of have a purpose and make an argument and sort of face outward into the world. Then chances are good that the first-year writing experience is sort of part of the preponderance of experiences that made that outlook possible. (Michael)

Though Michael did not solely credit the service-learning component of his first-year writing class with his post-graduation writing and community-oriented activities, he acknowledged community action as among the “preponderance of experiences” that shaped his values years later as a citizen-writer editing documents for the UConn Health Center, and as I will show, this idea of myriad experiences shaping students in their writerly and rhetorical growth echoes throughout the three case studies presented here.

Michael had been out of college longer than the other interview subjects in my study; he had been out of graduate school and in the workforce for a number of years by the time we talked. And so his comment about the amount and variety of experiences that have shaped him gave me pause. Michael seemed keenly aware of the post-college development that Beaufort (2007) noticed in her case study of Tim, where he learned discourse community knowledge (117), subject knowledge (121), genre knowledge (127), rhetorical knowledge (133), and writing process knowledge (138) in his engineering workplace setting that he had not learned in his undergraduate history career. Surely, Michael’s case study upholds previous findings that learning is dynamic and active (Yancey et al. 2014; Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000) as opposed to static and passive.

Juneau

Juneau took his service-learning course in fall 2012 and completed his bachelor’s degree in 2016, majoring in Spanish and writing an honor’s thesis on the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges. At the time of the interview, he was pursuing a master’s degree, planning to complete in the Spring of 2018. When he entered UConn, Juneau saw himself as a writer with a distinctive style—he enjoyed comedy and what he called “analytics” writing—but he knew he had not yet honed that style. Juneau’s point of departure (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014, 105) was uncertain; he knew what kinds of writing he enjoyed, but he did not feel confident in his ability to write in his own voice. When I asked what was most memorable about his first-year writing course, he did not reflect so much on learning how to cultivate that voice, but rather on reading texts about the levels at which social change occurs.

[T]he thing that stuck out the most was a text we went over that discussed [pause] varying degrees of change you can make, and it was like systemic level, some medium level and then like, the ground level, and the ground level was like working in a soup kitchen. Systemic was like planning cities or legislative changes. And that was something I hadn't ever encountered before. (Juneau)

Here, though he did not recall the name of the text, Juneau recalled Morton's organizing model of charity, projects, and social change (1995, 19-32)—an activist heuristic that maps out the kinds of community action one can take and the kind and scale of effects that action can have, from local to systemic change—and he sensed that he could choose his actions based on the changes he wanted to effect. Six years after the course, Juneau also recalled the value of his final project for the service-learning course, where he, like Michael, wrote brochures for the No-Freeze shelter in Connecticut, an example of a *project*, as it attempts to raise awareness of a service that addresses the immediate, material needs of social inequity (Morton 1995, 21).

This project had a long-term effect on Juneau's thinking because he was writing about people and trying to elicit donations for the shelter: "I was trying so hard to accurately represent a nuanced version of some of the people at the shelter and selectively put things in that would maybe promote donations."⁴ Like Michael, Juneau created public texts, and Juneau sensed his responsibilities as a citizen-writer quite keenly. Aware of the real-world consequences of his writing—the chance that his writing could elicit or discourage donations—Juneau felt pressure to accurately represent the residents of the shelter while appealing to those who may not have understood the root problems that cause homelessness. This was a problem of communication and context, as Juneau conducted interviews with No-Freeze shelter residents and felt compelled to "curate what [he] read and what [he] was getting in these interviews" to accurately represent the shelter residents' words while appealing to the possibly uninformed expectations of potential donors. Juneau's concern about this dynamic suggests that he had not yet encountered such direct and immediately important ethics of representation in his academic writing before taking on this project.

Juneau seemed eager—even before I asked about further community action apart from the course—to talk about his volunteer work teaching intermediate English to migrant farm workers in the Storrs, CT area, an activity he sought out as a Spanish major at UConn. He has also volunteered to stand in as a mock patient for clinical trials in the UConn Nursing Program. Kiely (2005) notes that service-learning can induce feelings of guilt, shame, and anger that can prove transformative for students, and if they reflect on the causes of these feelings, they can become more empathetic and socially active. Though Juneau does not explicitly link his current community activity to his first-year writing experience, he does credit the experience for giving him insight into the kinds of social change one can effect. When I asked whether or not he recommended a service-learning or community activity component for other writing courses, his answer was complex:

I don't know that [pause] I think [pause] maybe not. But I think I do my best writing when I'm alone, rather than working in a group. And I remember working in a group, and we all contributed, and it was a good group, but I think another alternative would be like writing specific for that class where you can do systemic change, like write to congressman or something like drafting letter after letter to hone what it is you want to get across. (Juneau)

Juneau described a situation in which individuals could work on their writing projects to submit to a larger body of texts that another student could compile and present to the appropriate people to effect systemic change rather than entirely collaborative projects, which he felt eliminated personal style from writing.

Juneau's awareness of genres and their rhetorical potential was reflected in his graduate work. In a master's program in molecular and cell biology, the writing habits Juneau developed in his undergraduate career continued to inform his writing. For example, he sought out workshops at UConn and Columbia University on narrative medicine, which he described as,

the idea that you can apply literary or critical analysis and, you know, close reading skills to, to patients. And if you teach physicians to analyze text and, and read subtext, and they'll be better at seeing things that don't immediately present themselves in their patients. (Juneau)

Juneau ultimately credited his literary education for helping him learn to write in the genre of narrative medicine, and felt that such training and narrative savvy make one better prepared and emotionally stable for patients who need that stability. Such a blurring of the lines between medical and literary writing genres and subsequent creation of the "narrative medicine" genre, as well as Juneau's awareness of this process, reconfirm Wardle's (2009) observation that "[g]enres arise when particular exigencies are encountered repeatedly" (768), and such an explicit encounter with the demands of genre that Juneau experienced writing for the No-Freeze shelter helped him note that awareness. In short, Juneau's literary and writing education combined with his early experience writing for a public. And considering the needs of No-Freeze shelter residents informed his keen awareness of writing's practical, ethical, and social outcomes.

After I stopped recording our interview, Juneau and I chatted for a moment until he asked me to restart the recorder. Below is the transcription of this addition:

[Interviewer]

Juneau, you made a note about the first-year writing course and the service-learning aspect, I think, having an impact or an effect on you professionally?

Juneau

Yes. I think this course made me consider the level of impact I'm going to have with my job. And, while previously, I may have been looking at a minor or low-level impact—and I don't mean to diminish the importance of it—to more of a systemic level impact. And I have been very intentionally trying to situate myself so that I'm going to be in a systemic level of impact in, in the jobs I'm looking for.

Juneau credits his service-learning experience with teaching him how much and what kind of effects his work can have on social change, again calling to mind Morton's (1995) charity, projects, and social change model. While this may not have instigated an identity as a social activist, it certainly had sway over how Juneau approached activism. In his pursuit of narrative medicine, Juneau both responded to what he saw as a need and shaped his own professional identity through writing, exemplifying the threshold concept, "Disciplinary and Professional Identities Are Constructed Through Writing" (Estrem 2015, 55). And while this identity construction did not happen in his service-learning class alone, the class seems an influential one in his undergraduate experience.

Skai

Skai took her service-learning in composition course in fall 2015, and by the time she sat down with me, she was in her senior year, double majoring in cognitive science and political science, and taking graduate courses towards a master's degree in public health. In the spirit of full disclosure, I had met Skai two years before our interview, when she began tutoring at the UConn Writing Center and I began as the graduate assistant director. In her first year, she was an exemplary tutor, and in her second year, she earned the position of Writing Fellow, a competitive position in which selected Writing Center tutors are embedded into sections of first-year writing designed to support first-generation students or those from underrepresented backgrounds, a position she resumed in her third year as a tutor. Also in her second year, Skai co-wrote and co-presented a panel presentation on the value of Writing Fellows in first-year writing courses at the Northeast Writing Center Association (NEWCA) annual conference.

Skai identified as a writer long before coming to college, writing poetry and novels from the age of twelve, and still writing creatively at the time of our interview. Skai added, however, that she had developed her academic writing since she arrived at UConn in 2015 and took her service-learning composition course. In fact, Skai did not have to take a writing course when she got to UConn because her AP scores exempted her from the requirement, but she wanted to continue to refine her academic writing in her first year. She decided

to try the course for one week and leave if she felt it unnecessary, but she was glad she stayed. Skai's "point of departure" (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014, 105) proved rather anomalous, as she was exempted from her composition course, but she elected to stay despite feeling equipped to handle college writing; for Skai, her writerly identity proved ever-emergent, and she reflected on that emergence metacognitively, noting the differences in expectations she had encountered as well as how she learned to address those expectations.

She pointed precisely to the differences between her high school writing instruction and the instruction that she experienced in college to explain the value of this experience.

I think the cool thing about that class is, instead of unlearning things in high school, we've replaced those with new skills that are more adaptable and more effective. And I really appreciated that from the first day. It was like, "We're going to talk about concision. And like, we've never spoken about concision before." So that's pretty much how that class went, and I stuck with it. (Skai)

With critical insight, Skai appreciated the course as a writing course, but her service-learning project also exposed her to new writing strategies that worked in conjunction with those that she practiced in high school. Skai partnered with the UConn Women's Center for her service-learning project and took on the task of redesigning one of the Center's webpages. Skai made clear that designing a web page is academic writing of a public text, noting that such work must be more deliberate and rhetorically aware than other kinds of college writing, as it will be public and serve the purpose of informing that public⁵.

[W]e did a website and a webpage. And these are all things, on the surface, that wouldn't seem like academic writing, but they're very purposeful. People need to read these things. And [web pages need] to be built in a way that people can understand them, whether it is a web page, or an oral history, or you having full interviews of people, asking them what they think about things and how you then use that source of information. (Skai)

Skai recalled being impressed with how varied the projects and work associated with them were as well; three years after the class, Skai recalled that one group made phone calls and another compiled oral histories and noted that all of these projects did truly academic work that needed to speak to an audience larger than that of the typical term paper.

Skai also recalled the work she did with the UConn Women's Center, and at the time of the interview, she was still in touch with her liaison at the Center. Since Skai concentrated on International Women's Rights in her political science studies at the time of our interview, this partnership was particularly important. Skai was also involved with other community action at the time of our interview, though she claimed this was not "entirely on purpose." She reflected on her work for internships and in her major, noting that she often began to think in more community-oriented or public ways, and her efforts tended towards making her work publicly accessible. For example, the summer before our interview, Skai had traveled to Seattle, Washington through her public health program to conduct community assessments, and she found herself wondering how the texts they created could work in a larger community:

I was also looking at how that community goes out of their way to make sure that the writing and the literature and graphics are culturally competent and connect to the people in that area. Because we went to communities around Seattle that were very ethnically diverse. So, do they have things in different languages? What do the graphics look like? Do the symbols and signs mean something? Can someone who doesn't speak English tell that this is compost, this is trash, this is recycling? And it really does influence a lot of my public health thinking when I'm thinking about community-based writing, because literature is communication. (Skai)

Skai very clearly understood how the course affected her in her writing as well as community engagement. Her comment that the community-engaged aspects of her work were not "entirely on purpose" suggests that she brought with her habits of mind (Sullivan 2014; Bacon 1999) that compel her towards social action in varied

contexts. That is not to say she learned these habits from service-learning alone; she began to develop those habits before her first semester at UConn. Regardless, her service-learning class could be one of many educational experiences that have shaped her as a citizen-writer to see the potential for social change in writing without having it explicitly pointed out for her.

When I asked what she could share with me that would help me better understand the long-term effects of her service-learning composition course, she noted that those effects continue to reveal themselves. She added that learning “kind of just sneaks up on you” and proceeded to tell me about her own writing style and the skills that she had noticed emerging in her peers as they continued to be socially active. Years after her service-learning course, Skai was aware of how the effects of her learning continued to emerge in unexpected ways, much like the way Michael cited his “preponderance of experiences” as more influential than a single course. Similarly, in her awareness of knowledge developing in a non-linear way, Skai demonstrates how “Writing Speaks to Situations Through Recognizable Forms” (Bazerman 2015, 35), as she and her peers demonstrated abilities to take on writing tasks as they entered new ones. This lack of immediate results, however, does not represent a discouraging finding for service-learning practitioners, as Eyler and Giles (1999) note, insofar as educators should not expect all or most of their students to experience dramatic and transformative experiences in one class, because these small transformations can affect a student’s trajectory and have significant influence over time.

ONE AMONG A “PREPONDERANCE OF EXPERIENCES”

The three case studies above, though not themselves representative of all service-learners, offer some insight into what students and instructors can expect from service-learning components in composition courses. In fact, Michael’s claim that such courses represent one among a preponderance of experiences echoes throughout Juneau and Skai’s reports of their own. Similarly, Skai’s observation that learning “sneaks up on you” also helps explain these reports. For example, Michael did not expect to become socially active in graduate school, but found himself equipped to do that work when it became available, and Juneau found himself able to engage

with narrative medicine years after the service-learning course that challenged him to weigh the aims of his writing and create ethical representation of No-Freeze Shelter residents. Skai applied the habits of thinking socially about texts that she honed during her service-learning partnership with the UConn Women's Center.

An individual course is, after all, one among many, and

[w]e might not expect all, or even most, students to have experiences powerful enough to transform, but where programs engage students in important work in the community and provide continuous opportunities for reflection, service-learning may be a catalyst for a dramatic redirection of their lives. (Eyler and Giles 1999, 18)

Indeed, as Skai reminds us, learning “sneaks up on you,” and it would be a mistake to rely solely on reflections from students who are still in their undergraduate careers to discover the long-term benefits of service-learning, even early on in the college curriculum. Michael reported an inclination towards editing and creating public texts years after completing his undergraduate studies, and Juneau's emergence as a citizen-writer happened as he completed his Master's degree and considered what to do with his career and doctoral studies.

While Juneau contends that mandatory service-learning has drawbacks because of the potential for public failures such as those noted by Shah (2018) and Mathieu (2005), it also bears mentioning that one service-learning composition course is just that: one course. Responses in this study suggest that service-learning experiences early in the college curriculum have potential sway over the trajectory of a student's emergence as a citizen-writer, as in the case of Juneau and Michael. Some students, such as Skai, are on their way to that emergence with or without a service-learning course. Others could simply benefit from learning *how* to find that identity for themselves—learning to reach out to community members, for example—but that learning could happen on its own, especially if students feel compelled to find it.

WHAT CATCHING UP WITH STUDENTS CAN TEACH US

These three case studies reinforce research on community-engaged writing that shows how students in service-learning composition courses develop writing-specific habits, such as rhetorical thinking and the ability to apply that rhetorical thinking to public texts as civic-minded citizen-writers (Bacon 1999; Deans 2000). Moreover, the case studies establish the long-term impact of service-learning courses on enabling students to sustain and further cultivate such habits. Even within this small sampling, the three participants showed enthusiasm for the benefits of service-learning in composition, but they each considered its use differently. Michael appreciated the exposure to “outward-facing” writing, which influenced his political activities as well as how he used writing at the time of our interview. Juneau explicitly noted an effect on his approach to community action insofar as it compelled him to think about how and in what ways such actions can effect social change; at the same time, he acknowledged that it might not suit every student. Skai, too, valued the service-learning experience, as it allowed her to engage with an on-campus community, learn how to write multimodally, and apply her already existing civic-mindedness to website design; and yet, again, she was already civic-minded before the class and would have likely pursued that education elsewhere if not in the service-learning composition course.

But Skai did not *have* to pursue it elsewhere. And by having that experience made available to her in a recognizable package—a college writing course—she was able both to integrate it into her curriculum and to learn about the intrinsically social aspects of writing. Although Michael and Juneau also had this course amid a larger college experience, they recalled the experience enough to participate in a study years later with a researcher they had not met before. This observation about respondents’ willingness to participate in my study leads me to a caveat about my methods: I invited over one hundred and fifty students to participate in this study, and these three are among the twenty who responded and thirteen who followed up with an interview. There was likely some self-selection by which students and alumni specially invested in education would be more likely to participate. Indeed, of the alumni I interviewed, all had either completed a graduate degree or were completing one, and many of the UConn seniors I interviewed were planning on graduate school.

This study presents an opportunity to look into the service-learning experiences of college writers and determine what they themselves value from that experience. My dissertation research includes a larger study in which I apply the same scrutiny to 13 students and alumni, four of whom did not take service-learning courses, and one who took a service-learning course at one of UConn's regional campuses in Stamford, CT. In the future, informed by this study, it would be telling to conduct truly longitudinal studies of such writers over the course of years, in the style of Beaufort's *College Writing and Beyond* (2007) and *Writing in the Real World* (1999) as well as Sternglass' *Time to Know Them* (1997). Studies into the experience of students examined through social science lenses could test this study's finding that service-learning is one among the many potentially significant educational moments students will encounter and explain more about its use in populations based on race, class, and gender, and ability. Finally, my study did not contend with technology, and since college classrooms increasingly acknowledge the multimodal nature of digital writing, a look into digital service-learning projects could further contextualize what we know about service-learning.

I include a personal note here because it adds to the exigency of examining student benefits of community-engaged writing, and I hope it will inspire further inquiry into that benefit by considering intersections of race, gender, and socio-economic class, specifically. This study, and the questions it seeks to begin answering, have been on my mind since I taught a service-learning course in 2013 at a school in which the student population was largely people of color, first-generation, and otherwise marginalized populations in academia. When I introduced the service-learning activities for the class, I noticed an improvement in students' engagement with their writing; they seemed to care more when their words had the potential to reach a wide audience and effect some change, and the contents of final course projects were informed by what students learned outside of the classroom. However, one student from the class lost their home during the semester. I first wondered how we could arrange for this student to stay in the class, but when they made the informed decision to drop, my attention turned to why they made that decision and whether the class itself was part of the problem. After all, I was asking a student to dedicate time beyond the minimum required contact hours per week to community service while this student was

facing hardships I could not understand. I could not help but notice the brutal irony there.

Thus, although my research into the pedagogy that I have seen work well continues to focus on the good of classroom-based public writing courses for students, stressing the importance of mindful planning and flexibility in service-learning classes, it also underscores the importance of examining critically and closely the effects of service-learning partnerships on community members and organizations. After all, if there were little chance that students in a service-learning class could grow personally, professionally, and civically because of their courses, then true community/student reciprocity (Deans 2000) would be impossible; designing such partnerships to benefit community members and students would pose unjustified risks to communities and students alike. Similarly, if students resisted critical awareness of the social and structural oppression and privilege that cause the problems they encounter, then any student gains would defy that reciprocity, again putting community organizations and members at risk of representing helpless recipients of the academy's ostensibly "good" works.

Much service-learning scholarship contends that the pedagogy fosters deeper, more reflective comprehension of social inequalities and inspires social action among students (Eyler and Giles 1999; Astin et al. 2000; Tucker-Loner 2014). However, my findings are somewhat different. The three case studies presented here suggest that service-learning may not be the tool to teach students that they *should be* socially active, but rather to teach them *how to be* socially active. Barriers to engaging in social action often arise from a lack of experience with it that, in turn, produce resistance based on preconceptions rather than experience. Service-learning in composition can introduce writers to socially engaged activities they would not necessarily encounter otherwise and could possibly resist. It can also help writers grasp threshold concepts in writing, such as audience, genre, and disciplinary identity, and apply these to their plans for social action. Knowledge about social inequities, and even a basic understanding that there are ways to address them, represent the core concepts that students can bring with them to college. When

that knowledge becomes transformative is when those students can learn the particulars of social action and how to do it.

One of the threshold concepts specific to writing studies that proved transformative in this study was “all writers have more to learn” (Rose 2015, 59) insofar as it allowed Michael to move past his self-described “arrogance” and realize that his writing is not intrinsically valuable without an audience there to read it. He himself signaled that this was a transformative realization when he reflected on what he had learned since his first-year writing class and described how writing can face outward, and how a writer can and should be aware of the effects of public writing. Similarly, Juneau learned that “writing addresses, invokes, and/or creates audiences” (Lunsford 2015, 20) when he had to consider public perception of the outward-facing texts he wrote to solicit donations for a community organization, and Skai explained precisely why web pages are academic and social texts that require rhetorical awareness to compose.

Much of the learning Michael, Juneau, and Skai shared was transformative. Whether they learned to reflect on themselves as dynamic writers, what kinds of action they could take through writing in the moment, or what they could do with writing in graduate school or their careers, they recognized some fundamental change in their understanding of writing and rhetoric that allowed them to engage in social action through writing. In other words, their knowledge about social problems and action gave them incentive to write publicly, but the transformative learning they did in college enabled them to do so. Therefore, this study suggests that service-learning does not “convert” students to activism—many students already care about social inequities—but rather has the potential to combine social action and reflection to educate the already “converted” to be more effective and mindful activists, writers, and rhetors.

The three case studies presented above also suggest that students can grow rhetorically after early exposure to community-based study, and I hope to see (and go on to conduct) further study of these effects and how they do or do not change based on the intersections of student identity, institution, and the passage of time. If a service-learning course amounts to one among many experiences that shape writers

over the years, then I see real value in learning how that experience can inform those writers (perhaps in unexpected ways), and what these writers can teach us as university stakeholders, faculty, and administrators as we continually reconsider the field of writing studies and the teaching of writing, as well as what we consider to be valuable writing/rhetorical knowledge.

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NOTES

- 1 The Conference on Community Writing is sponsored by the Coalition for Community Writing; also see the CCCC Position Statement on Community-Engaged Projects in Rhetoric and Composition at <https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/community-engaged>.
- 2 In addition, Mutnick's 2018, "Pathways to Freedom: From the Archives to the Street" describes student involvement with community archives, but does not highlight the first-year writing classroom, though it shares in the spirit and goals of service-learning scholarship of the 1990s and early 2000s.
- 3 See also Kiely (2005).
- 4 See Lunsford's (2015) threshold concept, "Writing Addresses, Invokes, and/or Creates Audiences (p. 20) in Naming What We Know.
- 5 See also Wenger (2019)

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