

## Book Review

---

Joseph Harris

### Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition

Thomas Deans  
Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000

*Writing Partnerships* is an unusual mix of enthusiasm and scruple. Thomas Deans writes as an advocate of service-learning in writing courses—and also as a scholar who explores a number of differing ways in which “service” is imagined as part of the work students do in the community and in the classroom. The result is a book that goes well beyond simply preaching to the converted, to those already committed to service-learning, and that instead challenges the wider field of composition to consider the social and intellectual uses of asking students to write in public as well as academic contexts.

Deans structures his book around three models for connecting writing courses to communities—writing *for*, *about*, and *with* the community—and offers case studies of each approach in action.

The writing *for* the community model puts students to work as writers for local, non-profit agencies, helping to produce the kinds of documents (proposals, newsletters, press releases, brochures, manuals, and the like) that such organizations need in serving their clients. The example of this sort of classroom-community partnership is a junior-year course in Writing in Sport Management taught by Laurie Gullion at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in which she asks students to take on various “real-world” writing projects for local health agencies.

Deans calls the second approach writing *about* the community, using as his example Bruce Herzberg’s first-year writing course at Bentley College, in which Herzberg asks students to work as literacy tutors in community settings and then to draw on these experiences in writing academic essays about the politics of schooling. (Herzberg has himself described this course in his 1994 *College Composition and Communication* essay on “Community Service and Critical Literacy.”) In contrast to the more pragmatic tasks

emphasized by the writing for the community approach, the focus here is on helping students acquire the moves and strategies of academic discourse.

The third approach, writing *with* the community, is illustrated by the work being done by Linda Flower and her colleagues at Pittsburgh’s Community Literacy Center (CLC), where advanced undergraduate and graduate students collaborate with local activists and neighborhood residents in creating materials for a public discussion of issues impacting their communities. Such work pushes beyond a focus on writing itself and toward what the CLC calls *literate social action* (112), bringing various stakeholders—landlords and tenants, teens and police, physicians and patients—together to negotiate their differences. Writing thus becomes more a means to an end for the CLC than the aim of its teaching.

Deans devotes a chapter to each of these three approaches, and in doing so depicts service-learning not as a unitary movement but as a set of varying responses to problems in teaching that emerge from the desire to make intellectual work matter, to move composition from the mere interpretation of texts to active intervention in the world. This is a hope shared by much of the profession, and Deans begins his study with a brilliant chapter on “English Studies and Public Service” in which he argues that service-learning projects can test and extend the claims made by prevailing academic theories of the social nature of culture and writing. This is followed by the weakest chapter in the book, an unconvincing attempt to reconcile the liberal pragmatism of John Dewey with the utopian fervor of Paolo Freire as a theoretical foundation for service-learning in composition. The problem with this attempt to theorize service-learning from two opposing directions is that it

doesn't seem to emerge from or connect strongly to the actual courses and programs that Deans studied, but rather to express his own political hopes for his work. But he is savvy enough not to force this conceptual frame on the teachers he talks with and observes, and the three chapters that follow—on Gullion, Herzberg, and Flower; on writing *for*, *about*, and *with*—offer a rich store of insights into how teachers can construct very different courses that nonetheless work toward a similar set of goals.

An implicit narrative underlies the unfolding of these three core chapters—moving as they do from a discussion of a course centering on writing for non-profit health agencies, to one offering a neo-marxist critique of literacy and schooling, to an unusual university-community partnership.

The strength of Laurie Gullion's course in Writing in Sport Management lies in how it embeds what might at first seem straight-forward

tasks—designing an informational brochure, drafting an office memo—in the complex web of social interactions and goals that make up the non-profit workplace. In this sense, the view of writing offered by such courses is deeply social. But there is often little space or time in such task-oriented environments for critical reflection, and Deans criti-

cizes the paternalism that he feels inheres in the relationship between the professional service-provider and client (in which the former diagnoses, treats, and thus in some sense controls the latter).

This skepticism inflects Deans' description of Gullion's Writing in Sport Management, which has the least openly politicized agenda of the three courses that he studies. Deans argues that such "writing-for courses tend to prefer cooperation with established social networks" (76) rather than encouraging cultural critique. But while I agree that we need to reconsider the professionalizing and routinizing of so many of our social interactions, I think Deans may slight the value and impact of the work of many non-profit agencies. I say this, in part, because my wife is a non-profit administrator who has directed programs offering, among other services, job training for under-prepared adults, daycare

for low-income families, and low-cost health services for community women. Her work has convinced me that non-profits can help maintain some of the last remaining public spaces in our culture that are not directly sponsored by government or corporations. If Deans had looked more closely at courses placing students in non-profit agencies with similar activist goals, his sense of the political possibilities of writing-for approaches might have been more hopeful. In this context, Anne Beaufort's nuanced account of writers learning to work for a community non-profit agency in her recent *Writing in the Real World* (New York: Teachers College P, 1999) offers a useful counterbalance to his perspective.

Similarly, while he clearly sympathizes with the critical agenda of Bruce Herzberg's first-year writing course at Bentley College, Deans worries that such writing-about courses "generally do not disrupt the dominant rhetorical practices of the academy" and that "a focus on critique can shortchange active community intervention in the form of public rhetorical acts" (76, 77). Well, yes, but still it's not clear to me that this criticism takes into account the fact that Herzberg is teaching first-year students who may not be socially ready to take on active roles in the community or intellectually ready to write effectively in public contexts. Deans powerfully contrasts the workings of academic critique and public activism, but I suspect that there are developmental issues, questions of what sorts of work students are ready to take on at what points in their education, that get lost in this discussion. And to the degree that the college writing courses can provide students with strategies for resisting and analyzing the commonplaces of our culture, teaching the "dominant rhetorical practices of the academy" may not be such a bad idea. Indeed, the failure to do so is precisely what Deans misses in writing-for efforts.

All of which puts us in a position to see the power of the narrative that *Writing Partnerships* sets up. After chapters on *writing-for* approaches that engage students in real-world tasks but fail to promote reflection, and on *writing-about* courses that insist on such reflection but limit active community involvement, we come to the CLC and its efforts to write *with* the community of Pittsburgh's North Side, an approach that seems to emphasize both literate action and a new, hybrid sort of intellectual discourse. As Deans describes this synthesis: "Without being mediated by nonprofit agency

Tom Deans depicts service-learning not as a unitary movement but as a set of varying responses to problems in teaching that emerge from the desire to make intellectual work matter, to move from the mere interpretation of texts to active intervention in the world.

---

bureaucracies (like many service-learning initiatives, particularly writing-for projects) or by schools (like many writing-about courses that focus on tutoring), the CLC realizes pragmatic possibilities for partnering directly with marginalized constituencies to help them exercise their writerly voices in the public sphere” (138).

I agree with this description. I had the opportunity to visit the CLC when I lived and worked in Pittsburgh. It is a remarkable place, and I join Deans in admiring the quality of both the academic and public writing that it has sponsored. And, certainly, the effectiveness of the CLC in generating serious public discussion of community issues has been a powerful argument for the value of teaching problem-solving strategies—and a caution to those critics (myself included) who once chided cognitivist rhetorics for failing to attend to the social aspects of composing. But the strength of *Writing Partnerships* is Deans’ willingness to look at the limits as well as the strengths of approaches to service-learning, and I worry about the pressure he must have felt to conclude his study with a success story. For the lessons to be learned from the success of the CLC have as much to do, I suspect, with the ability of Linda Flower and her colleagues to build on local connections and draw on institutional synergies as it does with the power of the idea of literate social action or of writing with the community. And so, as much as I admire the work of the CLC, I find myself resisting the ways in which Deans’ narrative seems to offer *writing-with* as a response to the limits of *writing-for* or *writing-about*.

And, indeed, much of *Writing Partnerships* argues for this more pluralistic reading—that is, for an acknowledgment of diverse responses to the problem of making writing matter. The best parts of his book are those in which Deans offers detailed accounts of teachers trying to find ways to connect the work they ask students to do as writers with the lives and concerns of

people outside the academy. And in the closing chapter and appendices of his book Deans shows how the three approaches can be blurred and combined to meet the demands of particular contexts and curricula. In his last chapter, Deans shows us his own work as a teacher, presenting a carefully written series of assignments—along with student responses to them—for an upper-division seminar in Writing in College and Community, a course which he describes as trying to fuse the sorts of practical experience offered by writing-for approaches with the critical reflectiveness encouraged by writing-about efforts (148). And he concludes his study with a useful set of appendices outlining community writing courses and program descriptions at colleges across the country. In doing so, his book continues and extends the traditional concerns of composition with the local and the pragmatic, with how ordinary people use writing for their own ends.

For service-learning to become a more integral part of the teaching of composition, as I believe it should, its advocates need not simply to assert an ideological agenda but instead to show how in asking students write outside the academy we can help them do the sorts of critical, intellectual work we most want to teach them. *Writing Partnerships* does so powerfully.

*Joseph Harris directs the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Writing at Duke University (<http://www.ctlw.duke.edu>), where he also teaches courses in first-year writing, the uses of popular culture, writing and social class, and the teaching of writing. Harris is the author of A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966 (Prentice, 1997).*