

Thomas Deans

## Community Service and Critical Teaching A Retrospective Conversation with Bruce Herzberg

Bruce Herzberg is Professor and Chair of the Department of English at Bentley College. He is the author of several articles on service learning, including "Community Service and Critical Teaching," published originally in CCC and reprinted in a number of anthologies, and "Public Discourse and Service Learning," published in JAC. He is also the author, with Patricia Bizzell, of *The Rhetorical Tradition and Negotiating Difference*. He began teaching service-learning courses in 1991, and one such course was a research site for Tom Deans's book on service-learning, *Writing Partnerships*.

**Reflections:** Your article "Community Service and Critical Teaching," first published almost a decade ago in *College Composition and Communication*, is among the most frequently cited articles in the scholarship of community-based writing. What stands out to you now as most salient from that article?

**Herzberg:** Well, first I have to say that it's really gratifying to know that it's cited so often. I was aware that it was being used—people said nice things, and sent me emails, and I saw some of the citations, but you don't ever really add them up. So I knew that the article was having some effect and I attributed it to several things. One was that it appeared relatively early in the expansion of service-learning in the nineties. While Campus Compact had been around for a while, since the mid-eighties, the emergence of service-learning was still a slow process, involving a lot of grassroots efforts. So the article came out at the right time.

Another thing that's salient for me is that I wrote it when I was trying to change my writing style. I felt that one of the problems in our field's published discourse, or in any academic writing, was that it wasn't entertaining enough. Articles were way too long, and repetitive, and with too many obligatory citations and references and elaborations. I was determined to write the service-learning article in an entertaining way, to use some narrative techniques without making the piece simply autobiographical. This writing challenge made me really enjoy writing the article. I wanted to convey what I had experienced, what my students had discovered, and the conversations that we had, without radically changing or dropping out of academic discourse.

As for the uses to which it has been put, the main thing that I like, of course, is that it seems to have spurred people to do service-learning, which was the main idea. I couldn't be happier about that result. I remember reading some of the early articles that refer to "Community Service and Critical Teaching," and I thought that maybe the authors misread this or that, or put the emphasis in a way that I hadn't intended, but it truly didn't matter to me, then or now. I felt that if somebody got interested in service-learning and now wanted to write about it, and my article provided something to climb on, so be it. That's often what we do in academic writing—bounce off of somebody else's work.

One other point stands out for me. There's a spot in the article where I argue that fieldwork is not sufficient in itself to achieve the desired results of service-learning. The fieldwork has to be planned and reflected in the class content and so on. That turns out to be, in my analysis of community service learning, the most important dilemma that we still face today. A lot of what happens in service-learning courses continues to be community service that is only peripherally connected to class work. Making the connections is not always easy, but it is essential. I'm very pleased when I look back on my article and find that it spells out the way that that linkage works.

**Reflections:** Your more recent article, "Service-Learning and Public Discourse" (*Journal of Advanced Composition* 20.2, Spring 2000), revisits your perspective on service-learning several years after "Community Service and Critical Teaching." Can you talk about how that article extended or revised your earlier thinking, particularly with respect to writing for the public sphere?

**Herzberg:** I wrote this article partly because of what you, Tom, said in your dissertation (and later in *Writing Partnerships*) about my assignment on "going public." (In fact, I mention your influence in the article itself.) I'm happy about this sort of interaction and collaboration. You visited in my class; you watched things happen; your criticism was informed and valuable. The article itself explains why I had been hesitant to move in the direction of public writing. My commitment to academic discourse—my feeling expressed in the first article about the connection between the need to argue persuasively in public settings and the academic elements that I needed to teach in the college setting—was something I didn't want to lose. I was a little afraid of diluting the academic discourse instruction on the one hand and possibly falling back on a letters-to-the-editor kind of public writing on the other. When I thought about it more carefully, I found a satisfactory approach, and that's what I wrote the article about.

It seems to me even more than ever that the need to be articulate about public issues is critical. Look at the corporate scandals we are involved in now. Or

look at the post-9/11 threats to civil liberties. Here are public issues that require us to be very articulate. I'm here at a business school and we have a major commitment to teaching business ethics. One key element of business ethics is that if you see something going wrong—say, you're an auditor or in some sort of administrative position in a corporation, and you see something happening—you have to be able to be clear about your analysis of the problem, you have to be confident that you can understand it and talk about it, you have to have a community of like-minded people who will help you if you need to challenge authority or go against the flow. So you need to be persuasive both within both your own circle and in a larger communal setting. Asking students to do persuasive public writing informed by the research and analysis that characterize academic writing is critical.

The textbook that Pat [Bizzell] and I wrote, *Negotiating Difference*, wasn't intended to focus on service-learning but we did take this public discourse element seriously. We tried to encourage students to look at public discourse and to analyze it and write it. Service-learning, however, definitely enhances students' motivation to engage in public discourse.

**Reflections:** What are your thoughts on community-based research, that is, projects that don't fall under the heading “service-learning” because they don't provide tangible service to nonprofits or local communities but that do involve students with local communities to do research.

**Herzberg:** You're right that such projects should not be called service-learning, when, after all, there is no service. Of course, there's nothing wrong with doing community-based research. Some of the benefits match those of service-learning: contact with the community, the opportunity to learn about real civic issues, and participation in first-hand research and data gathering. And the caveats for this kind of work are similar to those for service-learning. I'm thinking of the ethics of interviewing and observation, the need to respect privacy and, as my colleague Gesa Kirsch has taught me, to consider carefully the uses to which such research may be put, even when it has the appearance of anonymity. Service-learning requires an even more stringent approach: Community partners should never be made to feel that they are research subjects, so students must learn the best techniques of participant observation.

Your question makes me think of another category of quasi-service-learning: projects that take place on campus rather than in the community. I gather that some such projects have developed because, at many schools, location and logistics make getting to the community particularly difficult, which compounds the already-present difficulties of doing service-learning. Others seem to arise in set-

tings where on-campus service projects relate compellingly to a course theme. Some people in the service-learning movement object to calling on-campus projects true service-learning. I understand this reaction, but I don't share it. It seems to me that if these projects achieve some of the effects of "true" service-learning, such as getting students out of the classroom to do research, to find out about local needs, and to participate in a project that serves the college community, then I don't want to split hairs about the definition of what they are doing.

When I lead workshops, I find that people are very focused on what is and what is not service-learning: "I do this," they say, and "I do that. Is that service learning?" In some ways, these are useful and legitimate questions. Yet I find that I'm reluctant to define service-learning too rigidly. I'm afraid of discouraging somebody who might have a good pedagogical idea even if it isn't "technically" service-learning. So I'm inclined to say, "Well, service-learning or not, this doesn't mean that what you're thinking of doing isn't also good, doesn't have some of the same effects as service-learning." What I do emphasize, what I believe is essential for all these projects, is that there be a very clear, pertinent connection between the classroom work and whatever is going on out in the field.

**Reflections:** Could you talk about the relationship of service-learning to rhetoric?

**Herzberg:** It seems to me that you learn citizenship by seeing the connection you have to the community, and that takes us back to the foundations of rhetorical history and theory. The ability to talk coherently and persuasively about civic affairs was precisely what rhetoric meant. What it meant to be an educated person, from the time of the Greeks and the Romans, was to be articulate and to be concerned about public welfare. What does Thomas More say? "Education is not primarily for private gain but for public good." He was speaking about an education system that held rhetoric in very high esteem. What the university did, from Roman times through the Middle Ages and even through the 19th century, was to prepare people for public careers. The university, then, took a small group of the population and prepared them to be civil servants, ministers, lawyers, teachers, people who were in positions of public influence. And their education was infused with and culminated in the study of rhetoric.

**Reflections:** What other issues do you see emerging in service-learning?

**Herzberg:** I continue to be concerned about the shift from grassroots to top-down implementation. Until recently, I was unaware of this issue and didn't address it at all in the CCC and JAC articles. In workshops that I've done, though, and at conferences, I've encountered more and more people who said that they are being forced to implement service-learning. This shift began at the close of the 1990s, I think. In the 1980s and early to mid-nineties, implementation was only made possible through huge and often self-sacrificing efforts by individual faculty members who believed in and were excited about community-based work, encouraged by people like Edward Zlotkowski, who had access to deans and provosts and was enlisting institutional support. So it's ironic that by the end of the 1990s we are in a situation where "the provost told me to do service-learning." That's what I hear in workshops: "The dean mandated it"; "I was chosen to head up the project"; "I don't know anything about it, and I'm here to find out." And "I have to do assessment." And "I have no idea about what my budget is or how I'm supposed to promote this." And "there's a student requirement that they have to do service-learning." And "Now my colleagues are PO'ed at me because I'm the coordinator." And "I don't even get a class release."

I haven't seen very much written about this problem, and I'm concerned that our community address this issue forcefully.

**Reflections:** That puts a new spin on a commonplace assumption among service-learning practitioners: that institutions don't support service-learning enough. We don't often hear about the flip side of that issue: what happens when colleges and universities pressure faculty to do service learning?

**Herzberg:** Right. Exactly. I thought you might ask me if as department chair I was trying to create a situation in which all our classes or at least all our freshman classes had a service-learning component, and the answer is emphatically no. Precisely for this reason. You get such resistance when people are not ready for it. If faculty say, "They told me I had to"-it's already bad. As service-learning advocates move into administrative positions, whether as writing program directors or chairs or deans, it's important that we avoid anything that will be perceived as undue pressure. Our challenge will be to create just the right level of support, just the right level of promotion.

## Works Cited

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