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## Tapping the Potential of Service-Learning Guiding Principles for Redesigning Our Composition Courses

This article underscores the importance of examining community-based writing in practice. It traces the evolution of an "International Connections" service-learning project from a well-intentioned add-on to a thoughtful and critical component of a writing course. Distilling best practices from recent service-learning literature, the article concludes with a call for 1) integration of the service-learning project within the goals and activities of the writing course, 2) critical pedagogy and academic rigor, 3) mutuality/ reciprocity, and 4) diverse discourses (personal, civic, and academic) that invite students to write for, about, and with community partners for a variety of purposes and

*I was nervous because I thought some American people didn't like Asian people and my English skill was quite bad, so I was afraid that I could not make a good conversation with them. Before 'get-together,' I had never had a conversation with American students. I was afraid that they spoke too fast and I might not understand them. However, I was wrong. After I talked with them, I found that they were very nice.*

*It was fun to get to know a student that is from another country. That was the closest I ever got to another student that wasn't my own culture.*

Based in part on student reflections like these, I deemed my first foray into service-learning a success. Our "International Connections" project linked one section of English 101 (first-year composition) students at Fort Hays State University with students from the nearby Hays Language Institute, where international students come to learn English. We invited international students to our classroom for an initial meeting and listened while they introduced themselves and participated in a question-and-answer session. Later, we hosted a more social get-together, where U.S. students brought food and everyone participated in getting-to-know-you activities. Ultimately, FHSU students each drew the name of an international student to interview one-on-one, later using that information and experience as the basis for a paper in their composition class. Thus, international students had the opportunity to practice their English and socialize with U.S. students, while U.S. students broke down some cultural barriers and ended up with content for their writing as well.

I was glad to be finally participating in service-learning (or *community-based writing*, the terminology preferred by many who fear the word service places too much emphasis on server expertise and the neediness of the served<sup>1</sup>). It is an increasingly enticing option for composition faculty drawn to the promises of greater student engagement and more meaningful learning. Service-learning is clearly established and growing within the field of composition studies. Consider the evidence:

- the American Association of Higher Education and NCTE's *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition* (Adler-Kassner et al., editors, 1997)
- NCTE's recent book by Thomas Deans, *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*, including an appendix that describes service-learning initiatives in composition at sixty-one different colleges and universities (2000)
- new writing textbooks with a community-based writing focus such as
  - Tom Deans' *Writing and Community Action: A Service-Learning Rhetoric with Readings*
  - Ross and Thomas's *Writing for Real: A Handbook for Writers in Community Service*
  - Ford and Schave's *Community Matters: A Reader for Writers*
  - Bowdon and Scott's *Service Learning in Technical and Professional Communication*
- a Service-Learning and Community Literacy CCCC special interest group
- a chapter on "Community Service Pedagogy" in the recently published *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* (Tate et al., 2001)
- a *Service-Learning in Composition* website sponsored by NCTE ([www.ncte.org/cccc/ServiceLearning/index.shtml](http://www.ncte.org/cccc/ServiceLearning/index.shtml))
- conference presentations at NCTE, 4Cs, and the Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition
- an increasing number of articles by leading scholars within our most recognized composition journals
- and, of course, this very journal, *Reflections*, devoted to community-based writing

All of this activity, moreover, occurs within the larger context of service-learning scholarship across the disciplines.

Ideally, composition faculty would avail themselves of this wealth of thinking and theorizing before ever attempting to teach a service-learning class, to ensure a coherent, thoughtfully critical program. Ideally. I, however, was eager to begin and too overwhelmed as a newly appointed director of composition to do much delving beforehand. Within the series of developmental stages through

which Chris Anson asserts that service-learning teachers pass, I was definitely at stage one: full of initial enthusiasm and commitment (177). So, based on a couple of conference sessions attended, a couple of workshops on service-learning at neighboring Kansas State University, and a couple of articles out of *Reflections*, I dived in. And that might be what most of us have to do—after all, how many of us who teach composition for a living have the time to do a complete review of the literature? Unless one focuses on service-learning as part of his or her doctoral work or, perhaps, as part of one’s sabbatical research, gathering the necessary background information and insight to implement service-learning may well seem too daunting a task.

This article, then, is an attempt to provide some of that background and insight in one place, and to do so in the context of my own evolving service-learning course. During the semester immediately following my first attempt at service-learning with the International Connections project, I had the good fortune of going on sabbatical to (among other things) research service-learning. It was a humbling experience. The more I read, the more I saw that I should have done differently. Despite its limited success, my first community-based writing project could have been so much more—for both the international students and my composition students. The purpose of this article, then, is to give a nod to that success and, more importantly, to trace the shortcomings of that first attempt and the subsequent improvements made in light of the thoughtful service-learning work that has gone before me. That is, I follow the advice of B. Cole Bennett, who reminds service-learning faculty of how crucial it is “that we continue to critically monitor our progress, investigating our failures while we rejoice in our successes” (18).

### The Successes

The most positive result of the International Connections project was the (albeit limited) achievement of both academic and cultural goals. Through their participation in this project, 101 students honed their interviewing and note-taking skills as they worked one-on-one with the international students. Later, 101 students focused their ideas and organized them into academic papers—perhaps a comparison/contrast piece, a profile of an international student, or a critical analysis of U.S. life through international eyes. Their work on these papers followed common writing classroom practices: discussing ideas, drafting papers, giving and receiving peer response, and revising final drafts.

A primary cultural goal of the project was to begin bridging the gap of “otherness,” especially prevalent at a rural institution like Fort Hays State University in western Kansas. The Midwest is not known for its diversity, and many students come to FHSU having had little or no contact with someone from a dif-

ferent culture. Although international students—both those enrolled at FHSU and those from the nearby language institute—are a fairly common sight on campus, they often cluster in groups, and U.S. students, while ready to smile and offer a quick Midwestern “hi,” rarely move beyond that superficial greeting into real conversation. In “Surprised by Service: Creating Connections through Community-Based Writing,” Linda Cullum writes of “the melting away—at least temporarily—of stereotypes, fears, and ignorance of the ‘other’” when students meet and work “with people with whom they might otherwise never come into contact” (9).

That melting away process certainly began during our International Connections project. For example, before we began the project, a U.S. student wrote in his reflection journal that international students “don’t seem very friendly. They aren’t the type of people that would say hi as they pass you on the sidewalk.” That misperception was cleared up at our first question-and-answer session when a 101 student asked the international students, “What has surprised you the most since you’ve come to Hays, Kansas?” and a Korean student volunteered, “I was so surprised that people here say ‘hi’ to strangers! In my country, you only greet people you know. At first, I am thinking students who say ‘hi’ are talking to someone else, not me!”

Similar instances suggested that students were at least beginning to move beyond entrenched stereotypes and ignorance. After some initial silence at an early get-together—and a clear division of groups (with U.S. students huddled on one side of the room and international students on the other)—the room eventually filled with students mingling, talking, and laughing. A U.S. student wrote in his reflection journal: “One question seemed to lead to another and then it seemed that we were just talking. . . . We were able to laugh and joke around with each other.” (Note the undertone of surprise that one could actually talk easily and have fun with someone from a different culture.) Another student wrote of the experience: “It got rid of any stereotypes that were wrongly in my head, like, you can’t talk to one [an international student] because they don’t know English.” (I suspect, though, that the experience more realistically *challenged a few* stereotypes, rather than “got rid of” them all.) I found the following two entries from separate students to be especially heartening: “I probably would have never met any international students if we didn’t have this activity” and “We’ve been e-mailing back and forth every night since [the get-together].” The international students overcame a few fears as well, as noted in the opening quotation of this article and in the following reflection: “I thought I couldn’t understand well what students say because they speak so fastly. But I could more understand than I thought it. It was very helpful to me. It was easier than I thought it. I enjoyed it.”

Finally, students began addressing their stereotypes and assumptions as they wrote their papers for class. One student, Rhonda, originally planned to write a paper about the *differences* between Japanese and U.S. education. After her interview session, however, she decided instead to write on the *similarities* between Japanese teenagers and her own teenaged children here in the U.S. Another student, Charlotte, opens her paper with the line, “The first thought that comes into my head when I see a person of a different race or ethnic background is that I more than likely don’t have a lot in common with that person.” Throughout her paper, though, she traces the many similarities she shares with Pok, a student from Thailand, and in her conclusion she writes:

I used to think that because people did not speak the same language as I did, that they would have nothing in common with me. I now realize this is not the case. Pok comes from halfway across the globe and we still have so much in common, and our cultures are really not as different as I thought that they would be. Many countries may seem far from similar to America; however, that may not be the case. People simply need to take the time and initiative to figure that out.

Though somewhat naive, such thinking is also tentatively encouraging. The Thai student’s otherness has been reduced in Charlotte’s eyes—because of her discovery that he shares interests and experiences consistent with her U.S. experience. A next step might be for her to accept and appreciate those aspects of Pok’s experience that do not coincide with her own—for her to move beyond her notion of “whiteness [. . . as] the unexamined norm,” a concept addressed in the insightful book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum (93).

### **The Failures**

On the whole, however, the papers were disappointing. Only one student chose to tackle the challenging topic of looking at the U.S. through international eyes; everyone else opted for the simpler approaches of narrative, comparison/contrast, or biographical profile. Those genres do not necessarily preclude critical analysis, but for this particular assignment, sadly, almost all such papers lacked critical depth. I blame that in large part on my own uninformed planning. First of all, there was not enough *time*. The International Connections project was a two-and-a-half-week unit tucked into the middle of the semester, unrelated topically to what had gone before and what would follow. The only required contact with international students was the initial panel discussion and the get-together with a follow-up interview. Most 101 students started their interviews toward the end of the get-together, and some even *finished* them on the spot—meaning they had only two meetings with the international students before

beginning to write. Is it any wonder, then, that many 101 students at the writing stage complained that they did not have enough material for my modest 2-5-page requirement?

In an article in *Reflections* Hannah M. Ashley reports on her service-learning endeavors in Philadelphia, where first-year writers are linked with older adults to participate in literacy tutoring. After “an initial getting-to-know-you and match-up luncheon,” students meet numerous times with the seniors to collaborate with them on memoirs, letters, and other literacy projects (11). What for her students was merely an introduction to the service-learning project (the get-acquainted activity and luncheon) was, for my students, almost our entire project. We simply did not have enough of the “person-to-person dialogue” necessary for intercultural understanding (Flower, “Partners” 107).

We also did not have enough opportunities for the kinds of critical reflection that might have informed the 101 students’ writing, fostering greater critical depth. As Bruce Herzberg warns us, “The community service experience doesn’t bring an epiphany of critical consciousness—or even, necessarily, an epiphany of conscience” (315). Instead, that experience must be couched in some sort of intellectual context, surrounded by readings, discussion, and critical reflection. Without such careful attention to analysis, Aaron Schutz and Anne Ruggles Gere assert, “we may end up reinforcing ideologies and assumptions we had hoped to critique” (147). Such was the case in at least one instance during the International Connections project, when cultural awareness seemed to be lacking entirely. One U.S. student used his paper to contrast Japanese and American food—emphasizing the weird and substandard nature of the other culture’s diet. His paper dripped with sarcasm: “Who *wouldn’t* prefer slimy raw fish to a thick, juicy steak?” He might have thought he was being funny, but he was actually being ethnocentric and unthinking. Rather than bridging gaps, our project—with its inadequate reading/thinking/discussing—in this case had only reinforced notions of superiority and “otherness.”

Hand in hand with critical pedagogy is Edward Zlotkowski’s call for greater academic rigor within service-learning programs. The success of such community-based programs over the long haul, Zlotkowski contends, will hinge on their ability to link community experience with traditional academic goals. While International Connections students did write traditional classroom papers, their learning and the project itself could have been enhanced by the kinds of readings, intellectual collaboration, and traditional research practices common in the academy. Without such rigor, the program might be guilty of what Laura Julier calls “feel-good pedagogy” (135), or it might find itself on the low end of the dichotomous description of service-learning offered by Alice Reich: “from a warm-fuzzy to an academically rigorous experience; from course

add-on to an integral component” (5).

### **Moving in the Right Direction**

My first step toward revision was to expand the scope and time factor of the project. While I would not have needed to take such an extreme step, I decided to spread the International Connections project essentially over the course of the entire semester, fully integrating the project into the design of the course and allowing plenty of opportunity for intellectual preparation and reflection. Preparation began the first week of class as students freewrote about a time when they felt themselves to be “the outsider”—writing they later developed into a personal essay. During that first week students also began reading selections from *Crossing Customs: International Students Write on U.S. College Life and Culture*, a collection of essays by international college students (Garrod and Davis). The readings explore notions of self and personal identity, and they also offer varying critiques of U.S. culture. These themes, then, informed the work of the semester as students read, reflected in their journals, participated in small- and large-group discussions, and wrote papers ranging from expressive to academic.

Expressive papers came early in the semester—the first narrating feelings of exclusion, and a second exploring how each individual student’s past had shaped his or her identity (recurring themes in *Crossing Customs*). As Patricia Stock and Janet Swenson note, starting with personal writing is a logical first step, for students “learn more easily and better when they undertake a new study in terms of the images and experiences they bring to it from their home communities” (154). Moreover, concepts that might otherwise seem abstract or distant when encountered in the readings have more relevance and meaning if students have first explored those concepts in relation to their own stories (155).

My students moved into academic writing as they summarized selected essays from our reading that they anticipated using as outside sources in a later academic paper critiquing American society, compiling an annotated bibliography in MLA format. Before writing that essay, however, 101 students spent four weeks getting to know international students from the Hays Language Institute (HLI) and working on collaborative writing projects with them. (Logistically, I had to coordinate this timing with the HLI instructors, as they run four-week sessions that needed to coincide with our International Connections project; otherwise, some international students might have finished their program of study and moved on before completing the collaborative work with my 101 class.)

Aside from spending more time with the international students, composition students also spent that time in a way different from before. Our approach



during the first go-around was simply too one-sided, without much mutuality. *We* questioned *them* during the initial visit, *we* planned a get-together and brought refreshments for *them*, *we* interviewed *them*, and then *we* wrote papers about *them*. Clearly, we were the agents and they were the subjects. This time we began with a reciprocal question-and-answer session, with both groups of students asking questions of each other, demonstrating that we all have much to learn *from one another*. Cooperatively, we planned the get-together, with both groups contributing ideas for the get-acquainted activity, and both groups bringing favorite foods to share.

The most significant difference, however, was the writing accomplished. This time, students formed writing teams comprised of U.S. and international students to work collaboratively on newsletters covering mutually decided-upon topics. Adam, a U.S. student, and Naruemol, a Thai student, wrote an article comparing and contrasting their two respective countries. Erika (U.S.) interviewed Takanori (Japan) and wrote a profile of him and his experiences as an international student. One team's newsletter was devoted entirely to surviving as a college student in Hays, since many HLI students go on to enroll at FHSU after completing their language study. Articles ranged from "How to Meet New People" to "How to Get a Job in Hays." Extra copies of the newsletters—printed with funds from a Learn and Serve mini-grant I secured—went to the Hays Language Institute for use with future classes, which always need high-interest, relevant reading materials in English. Writing teams in similar service-learning classes could collaborate on projects other than newsletters—perhaps a survival manual for incoming international students, or an article (or series of short articles) for the campus newspaper on such possible topics as "How to Get to Know an International Student" or "International Students Reflect on American Life." Unlike the papers students handed in the first time I attempted service-learning—papers written to the teacher—the writing done collaboratively in the revised course has a richer and more authentic rhetorical situation, with clearly defined audiences and purposes.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this interaction, students kept work logs (recording the meetings held, work assigned, team deadlines set, work completed, and so on) so that the HLI instructor and I could monitor and evaluate the work of the collaborative teams. Students in English 101 also kept journals, in which they recorded their experiences, observations, and reactions. Chris Anson has cautioned that "[j]ournal writing in many service courses may serve the purpose of creating a log or record of experience, but falls short of encouraging the critical examination of ideas" (169). To avoid this pitfall, I required that students tie their journal observations whenever possible to the reading, thinking, and discussion begun during the first half of the semester. In particular, 101 students



were encouraged to use readings, observations, interactions with international students, and emerging analyses to, in the second half of the semester, develop an academic argument critiquing some aspect of American culture. That paper was essentially a research paper drawing upon readings, interviews, observations, and personal experience.

The final paper for the semester was a capstone essay reflecting on the entire semester: types of writing accomplished, thinking that had expanded or changed, as well as self- and other-awareness that had developed. Students wrote about acquiring specific writing skills—like incorporating details or using MLA format. They also wrote about changes in their own thinking. Kelli wrote, “This semester of English Composition had more of an effect on me as a writer than any English class I have ever taken. . . . [W]e focused on writing in a way that forced me to realize my own personal outlook on life.” Of course, there is always the danger that students are savvy enough simply to tell us what we want to hear. At least in one case, however, a student offered tangible evidence of her changed perspective. In her capstone essay, Erika wrote of her earlier thinking: “Before our newsletter project, I was not fond of people from other countries coming to America to use our school and our money, and to steal our jobs. I could not care less whether or not I had a friend from another country.” She later came to feel “truly ashamed” of that attitude. “The students I worked with were hilarious and made me laugh every day. They taught me about their country, food, and life back home. I still talk to some of the students I met through this project. . . . I respect the international students who study in America, and I am pleased they are here.” The truest indication of her changed perspective came at a Student Government Association meeting where international students were requesting travel funds to attend a conference on American culture over Christmas break:

Some of my fellow senators in Student Government felt the students were asking for a free vacation. I quickly spoke up on behalf of the international students, explaining how hard these particular students work and how much effort they put into studying in America. I also pointed out that these students have no place to go during Christmas break. The outcome to our heated debate was extremely unusual. Student Government could not grant the requested amount to the group because they were not registered as a Fort Hays State University student organization on campus. I was terribly upset by this predicament, as were many other senators. To solve this problem, several senators donated enough money to send this group of international students to their Christmas conference. If this situation had taken place before my lesson in diversity, I would have lacked involvement in this debate.

Now, I am not arguing that Erika's experience was typical, but I do offer it as evidence of the *possibilities* for real change and informed action that can emerge from a thoughtfully developed service-learning course. This example also illustrates how the capstone essay allowed Erika to process her evolving attitudes—and to link them to her service-learning experience.

Writing for the semester, then, ran the full gamut of discourse from expressive (journal entries, narratives, personal essays) to civic (collaborative projects with public purposes and audiences) to academic (annotated bibliographies and research papers) to some sort of blend (capstone essays). Students surely benefit from such a wide array of writing experience that differs from the traditional writing classroom, for as Nora Bacon reminds us, “[A]s long as we design our courses around personal and literary essays, we are teaching a tiny corner of the world of discourse” (52). While we cannot “teach it all” in one short semester, we *can* provide a variety of writing opportunities, exposing our students to more than that tiny corner.

Tom Deans gives us another way of classifying discourse within the service-learning curriculum. He organizes his book, *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*, around three types of service-learning writing: writing *about* the community, usually in journals and academic essays; writing *for* the community, usually nonacademic writing such as manuals, newsletters, etc.; and writing *with* the community, usually collaborative inquiry and writing (16-20). In light of these classifications, the writing within the newly revised English 101 course with the International Connections theme still includes writing *about* the community (in journal entries and course papers), and because of the increased critical pedagogy, that writing demonstrates greater intellectual depth than similar writing done during the pilot service-learning project. (For example, in writing the “Critique of American Culture” essays, students drew upon their classroom reading and their interaction with international students to write on topics ranging from educational opportunities to materialism to the American work ethic.) The course now also includes a mixture of writing *for* and *with* the community as teams of international and U.S. students put together their collaborative projects.

### Closing Thoughts

Do I regret diving in without adequate theoretical grounding in service-learning? No . . . and yes. No, because I discovered that you can do almost everything wrong and still have some good results. With that first, flawed attempt, students were still engaged, wrote interesting and appropriate papers overall, cleared up certain cultural misperceptions, and began forming connections and even friendships across cultures.

But yes, I do have some regrets because I am now aware of the rich possibilities inherent in service-learning when we consciously apply the theoretical principles that composition researchers and practitioners have advanced in recent years. We owe it to ourselves and our students to tap into those principles as we design our courses:

**Integration**—The syllabus needs to allow enough time for meaningful interaction, and students need adequate preparation for and reflection about the service-learning project.

**Critical Pedagogy and Academic Rigor**—Outside readings, critical discussions, guided reflection, and use of academic discourse can ensure that the service-learning project accomplishes academic and not just altruistic goals.

**Mutuality/Reciprocity**—Faculty should look for ways to recognize and utilize the contributions of all parties involved, members of the community as well as members of the academy.

**Diverse Discourses**—Service-learning offers a ripe opportunity for students to explore varieties of written discourse (expressive, civic, and academic) for a variety of purposes (writing about, for, and with).

Certainly, trying service-learning in the first-year writing course can be a risky and time-consuming venture. Following these guiding principles, though, we can enrich our classrooms and our teaching. Alice Reich writes of investigating service-learning “in order to stay alive as a teacher” (3). When we design a course that incorporates the best of what practitioner-researchers have to tell us about community-based writing, we do indeed “stay alive,” and our students discover the power of writing to reveal the world—and even transform it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Linda Flower, who writes, “I am cautious with the word ‘service.’ I don’t want my students to see themselves as the donors of knowledge or expertise to others in need, but as partners in collaborative planning and mutual learning” (“Evolution” 4).

<sup>2</sup>Some will contend that the academic essay occurs within a true enough rhetorical situation—after all, can the teacher not be a “real” audience? Are the purposes of demonstrating mastery of academic discourse conventions not “real” purposes for a student? Even if we grant such claims, an argument can still be made for introducing students to rhetorical situations outside the classroom to broaden their repertoire of writing skills. Perhaps Nora Bacon says it best: “[W]e cannot expect a body of

skills and knowledge about writing developed in a single rhetorical context to have universal application” (53).

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