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In the Eye of the Beholder
Contrasting Views of Community Service Writing

This article adopts the perspective of rhetorical theory to examine student, teacher, and client assessments of community service writing projects created by students in a technical writing course. The study compares both students' and clients' assessments of the benefits of the service-learning experience and the teacher's and clients' evaluations of the documents. It highlights significant discrepancies in the teacher and client assessments stemming from different views of the rhetorical situation. Analysis of these differences leads to recommendations concerning best practices for organizing,
evaluating, and conducting classroom research on community service writing in a technical writing context.

Ironically, little empirical research on community service learning focuses on the community's perceptions of the service-learners' work (see reviews by Cruz and Giles; Ferrari and Worrall; Vernon and Ward). As Janet Eyler has observed, in spite of the "flood of service-learning research in the 1990s . . ., most studies have focused on the impact of service-learning programs on students." Empirical research on community service writing is no exception. For the most part, studies have explored the effects of service-learning on students' academic learning, personal development, and sense of civic responsibility. Of course, as educators, we need to identify these educational outcomes of service-learning to justify its inclusion in our courses. But, as Alan Waterman points out, while "benefits to the community are not, strictly speaking, educational outcomes," assessing the impact of service-learning on the community can not only fulfill our humanitarian desires to help the community but enable us to determine whether service-learning has fulfilled certain educational objectives as well (5).

Waterman's observation definitely applies to community service writing, if we take rhetorical theory seriously. According to Lloyd Bitzer, writing is rhetorically effective when it "fits" a rhetorical situation, a situation consisting of an exigence, constraints, and an audience (386). Thus, the audience's response is critical. Richard Lloyd-Jones explains: ". . . if the reader makes the appropriate response, the writer has written well" (41). However, in a rhetorical situation, "the reader" is not just any reader. Readers must constitute a "rhetorical audience," Bitzer states, "those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change" (387).

Bitzer's definition challenges the assumption that composition teachers are appropriate rhetorical audiences for most student writing. In a classroom context, we expect the *quality* of students' writing to influence our teaching and grading, but we generally try to resist being swayed by the message itself. However, even when the client evaluates their work for the organization's constituencies, students writing for a community organization face a different rhetorical situation. As Paul Heiker notes, service-learning projects offer "*real* rhetorical situations for students, real audiences, subjects, and purposes to work with, real people to become in writing" (72). Such situations can help students "understand writing as social action"—one of our most important educational objectives (74). Thus, when we allow students to take advantage of service-learning opportunities, we need to determine whether their writing fits these "real" rhetorical situations, not just the classroom context. And to do so, we need to question clients as well as students about the impact and quality of students' documents.

That is why I solicited clients' responses to the documents my students created to fulfill a service-learning requirement in my technical writing course. But unlike most of the researchers who have solicited clients' feedback on community service writing (e.g., Hellman; Sayer; Weaver) or service-learning in general (e.g., Cairn and Cairn; Ferrari and Worrall), I sought to compare that feedback with the students' and my own assessments.

My technical writing course was an ideal vehicle for such a comparison because technical writing courses have traditionally focused on users and, specifically, users in the workplace. Thus, in contrast to courses where students write reflective or academic papers *about* their community service, a technical writing service-learning course calls for a careful assessment of a document's "usability" in a particular community context. Moreover, in my technical writing course, research and writing were virtually the only services students provided, so the clients' assessment of the students' documents assumed much greater significance than in courses that promote tutoring, building, mentoring, and other types of hands-on service.

Thus, I had reason to wonder whether the clients thought the service-learning had benefited the community as much as the students assumed it had. In his study of service-learning, David Greene found that disabled clients and many of the students visiting them did not share an understanding of how and whether the visits were benefiting the clients. Such differences in perspective might be even greater when students *write* for the community because they might not know how to interact with clients to identify the clients' rhetorical needs. Research on technical writing suggests as much. In her study of student writing for an allergy clinic, Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch vividly documents how students failed to hear or overruled a client's requests while seeking affirmation for their work instead of critical feedback (197-202). But students are not always at fault: Ann Blakeslee shows how clients at a computer company failed to communicate adequately with student writers (186-89). Such miscommunication might be more likely at nonprofit sites where staff are often overburdened or inexperienced (McEachern 216-220).

Different perspectives on the value of service-learning might also arise from different attitudes toward "school work." Students might feel that their service-learning task is artificial—a form of "forced volunteerism" or a self-serving homework assignment that does little for the community (Carrick, Himley, and Jacob 62-63). Even when students believe they are making a difference, clients might view students' writing as nothing more than a school project: Like some clients in the for-profit sector (Blakeslee 179-80), they might assign students inconsequential tasks because they are reluctant to entrust novices with critical work. Consequently, students and clients might regard the students' writing in radically different ways.

On the other hand, the clients and I might differ in our assessment of the students' writing. In two case studies of community service writing, Nora Bacon exposes striking differences in writing assessment by the teacher vs. the client. In "Building a Swan's Nest for Instruction in Rhetoric," Bacon describes how Nancy, an English teacher, discovered that "her demand for thorough, specific development of ideas" proved inappropriate for a newsletter whose readers did not need much background information (598). Likewise, in "Community Service Writing," Bacon recalls her own embarrassment when the director of a recycling center recommended revisions that contradicted hers. He rejected her idea of adding supporting information and citations and requested changes in format that she had never considered: bulleted lists, a photograph, and a diagram as well as variations in typeface, captions, column width, and the color of the paper (50).

The director's recommendations might not have surprised a technical writing teacher since document design plays a far more significant role in technical writing classes than in other composition courses. But Bacon's case studies still suggest that we should not assume that writing teachers and clients see eye to eye. In fact, we should actively seek client feedback if we wish to help students produce rhetorically effective documents. Thus, in the spring of 2001—with the help of our university's Center for the Advancement of Service-Learning (CASL)—I set out to compare clients' views with the students' and my own.

Below, I describe my service-learning course, Technical Writing: Pre-Professional, a course in which students wrote *for* the community, rather than *with* or *about* it (Deans). After presenting the service-learning project and the research methodology, I compare the students' and clients' perceptions of the projects as well as the clients' and my assessments of the students' documents. These comparisons reveal the potential of service-learning to transform teaching as well as learning.

The Service-Learning Projects

To fulfill the service-learning requirement, the 17 students enrolled in my technical writing class conducted research and wrote documents at the request of nonprofit and community organizations. Because most of the students were pre-med or allied health majors, the majority of the organizations were health-related enterprises such as a center for sickle cell disease, the American Cancer Society, and a minority AIDS education office. Included also were organizations that offered community programs for low-income children and shelter for battered women. However, two of the clients worked at for-profit businesses (a dance studio and Safeway pharmacy) that had commissioned manuals to educate the public. Thus, the students' clients ranged from physicians, psychologists, and pharmacists to program administrators, public relations managers, and dance coordinators. Most of the clients had requested brochures, pamphlets, and manuals targeting their constituencies: "end users" that included patients, parents, and the public. As a result of this extra layer of audience, many of the students' direct clients were functioning simultaneously as evaluators (as I was) and as rhetorical audiences—"mediators of change" (Bitzer 387) who would decide whether and how the documents would be used. Thus, in these rhetorical situations, the students were targeting two audiences in addition to me.

The clients, end-users, and I were not the only readers students had to accommodate. Since I expected the students to write about technical subjects related to their majors, I insisted that each student consult a technical advisor (a professor, professional, or Ph.D. student) who could recommend sources, review drafts, and vouch for the accuracy of the student's work. However, I did not want to impose on these advisors by asking them to write comments and grades on the students' drafts, for they were volunteering their time and expertise. Consequently, I asked them to discuss problems with the students and sign the drafts when they approved of the content.

After students incorporated the suggestions offered by their technical advisors, I marked and graded the students' revisions. Afterward, the students revised their documents again and these "presentation copies" were submitted to the clients. By then the exam period was ending, so I had to compute the final grades without the clients' feedback.

Method

To document the impact of the projects, I distributed four questionnaires. Two elicited responses from students:

Student Benefits Questionnaire. Designed by CASL, this form consisted of a series of checklists asking students to rate and to enumerate the personal benefits of their service-learning experience.

Student Learning Log. To supplement the CASL checklists, I collected some reflective writing, as Chris Anson has recommended, to help students connect their academic work with their community service (167). Specifically, I asked students to write anonymous responses to five open-ended questions about their service-learning experience, questions such as "What did you learn about the community issue that you addressed?" and "What did you learn about the role of research and writing in community service?"

After distributing questionnaires to the students, I mailed their clients the other two questionnaires:

Client Benefits Questionnaire. This CASL form differed from the student version. It included two checklists for clients to rate the students' performance and to enumerate the benefits to the organization. It also posed two open-ended questions: "Do you think the service learner was adequately prepared...?" and "How could the service learner have been more helpful?"

Writing Questionnaire. In contrast to CASL's form, my questionnaire for clients focused on the quality of the students' writing. It asked each client to comment on the student's document and to rate the content, arrangement, and style on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Unsatisfactory and 5 = Excellent). On the questionnaire, "Content," "Arrangement," and "Style" were defined as follows:

> **Content:** Is the content relevant and informative? Is the information at an appropriate level for you or the intended readers?
>
> **Arrangement:** (i.e., organization, layout, and graphics). Is the arrangement logical, coherent, and appealing? Is it appropriate for you or the intended readers?
>
> **Style:** Is the style sufficiently clear, concise, and correct? Is it appropriate for you or the intended readers?

With each Writing Questionnaire, I enclosed a cover letter to reassure clients that their responses would be confidential and would not affect the service-learners' grades—only how I assessed future students' documents.

While I waited for the clients' responses, I reviewed the students' "presentation copies" and completed the same Writing Questionnaire that I had sent to the clients. Then, when all 17 clients had responded, I tallied the responses from both Benefits Questionnaires, coding the answers as follows: Yes = 1 and No = 0 or Very Pleased = 4, Pleased = 3, Somewhat Displeased = 2, and Very Displeased = 1. From the Writing Questionnaires, I recorded the 1-5 ratings. To determine the statistical significance of the findings, I conducted chi square, Somer's d, gamma, and t-tests and computed Pearson correlations as well as the means. What I found was enlightening.

RESULTS

The Benefits Questionnaires revealed that most students and clients agreed about the impact of the service-learning projects. However, the Writing Questionnaires exposed significant differences between the clients' and my own evaluation of the students' documents.

Student vs. Client Perception of Benefits

In general, the students were satisfied with their service-learning experience. On the Student Benefits Questionnaire, all checked "Pleased" or "Very pleased" (see Table 1). Table 2 shows that the students were particularly pleased with the "opportunity for creativity" and the relationship of the service-learning activity to their course work. They were least satisfied with the time or hours required for service.

Table 1 • *Frequency of Ratings of Level of Satisfaction With the Service-Learning Experience Assigned by Students and Clients*

Level of Satisfaction	Students*		Clients	
	n	%	n	%
Very Pleased	4	25	8	47
Pleased	12	75	4	23
Somewhat Displeased	0	0	3	18
Very Displeased	0	0	2	12

* NOTE: n=16. One student did not complete the questionnaire.

The main reason the students were pleased is readily apparent from Table 3: Most believed that they were serving the community, and this perception imbued them with a feeling of efficacy. First of all, the majority of the students reported that the service-learning was beneficial because it permitted them to apply what they had "learned inside the classroom to meet community needs." In Nona's words, it was a "worthwhile project rather than a 'waste-of-time' assignment."[1] This sense of purpose motivated some students to work harder:

Table 2 • *Students' Ratings of the Service-Learning Project (N=16)*

Characteristics	Poor	Satisfactory	Excellent
Relation to coursework	0	9	7
Site supervision	1	11	3
Required time to perform service	2	13	1
Working conditions	1	9	5
Fulfillment of expectations	0	10	6
Opportunity for creativity	1	5	10
Fulfillment of course objectives	0	10	6
Hours of service	2	9	2

NOTE: One student did not complete the questionnaire. Other students did not rate all of the characteristics.

"Since the project is to be used," Frieda explained, "it makes us, the students, more careful and thorough about what we are writing." Above all, students said they had profited because the projects had allowed each of them to "serve as an involved citizen in the community." For example, Erica said she appreciated the "chance to do a good deed without getting paid for it," and Kenya stated, "I feel good because I'm helping someone who doesn't want money." Maisha liked the "feeling of giving back," while Gerry rejoiced, "I felt I was actually contributing to the wellness of the community."

On the other hand, Table 1 reveals that the clients were not as satisfied as the students were, although the differences are not statistically significant. While none of the students checked "Somewhat Displeased" or "Very Displeased" on the Benefits Questionnaires, nearly one third of the clients did. Significantly, in four of those five cases, the student had not consulted the client about the topic. For instance, a client responsible for AIDS education for clinicians recalled, "He merely called me a few times and asked me what type of work we did at my office." As a result, this client was "very displeased" with the student's HIV/AIDS guide for African Americans: "It is not my intention to use the document because it is useless to the organization. It is very elementary and wouldn't be appropriate for our providers." As for the fifth case, a clinical psychologist who was serving as both client and advisor was displeased because her service-learner wrote a grossly inaccurate draft and then failed to consult her for technical advice.

Table 4 shows that other clients were satisfied with the service-learning because the students had fulfilled those clients' expectations. Like the students, the majority of the clients felt that the students' work had benefited their organization, and consequently, the community (see Table 5). Nearly half believed

Table 3 • Number of Students Citing Benefits (N=16)

Type of Benefit	Percentage	Frequency
Served as an involved citizen	75	12
Used lessons to help the community	69	11
Learned something new about major	50	8
Applied lessons to real life	44	7
Strengthened communication skills	44	7
Enhanced sense of civic responsibility	44	7
Grew intellectually, socially, and personally	44	7
Improved critical thinking	31	5
Was exposed to diverse populations	31	5
Developed leadership skills	25	4
Connected theory and practice	25	4
Other	7	1

NOTE: One of the seventeen students did not complete the questionnaire.

that their organization had profited because the students had "completed one (or more) specific tasks that [the clients] otherwise would not have been able to complete." Most clients also thought that the service-learning projects had benefited the community by giving their "organization the opportunity to help a larger number of people." Clients offered examples of these benefits when they explained how they had used or planned to use the students' documents:

A researcher at a center for sickle cell disease asked a student to present her findings about the role of BP1 in sickle cell disease at a meeting of the Journal Club at the center. His research team also read and discussed her report in the lab. He concluded that "it was helpful. . . ."

A professor of allied health sciences was so pleased with a student's exercise manual for the elderly that she decided to issue it "to geriatrics in the black community to increase awareness of and participation in an exercise program."

A studio dance coordinator, who had commissioned a brochure about the studio, pledged to share the student's brochure with parents and leave it "in a location for all to read."

An emergency room physician deeply appreciated a student's pamphlet about the overcrowding and closing of hospitals. He disclosed that he had already shared it with "colleagues and friends outside medicine who found it very informative. Most people had not had the opportunity to read about the issues affecting this aspect of healthcare, let alone an analysis of those issues, in a single document."

A hospital nurse, having received a guide about cardiovascular complica-

Table 4 • *Clients' Ratings of the Service-Learners' Performance (N=17)*

Characteristics	NA	Poor	Satisfactory	Excellent
Reliability	5	1	1	8
Ability to perform assigned tasks	5	1	2	7
Motivation	6	0	1	8
Willingness to learn	7	0	0	8
Fulfillment of expectations	5	0	1	10
Communication skills	4	0	5	6
Interest in assigned tasks	6	0	0	9
Workplace demeanor	7	0	1	6
Creativity	4	0	2	8
Overall performance	5	1	2	8

NOTE: Some clients did not rate all of the characteristics.

Table 5 • Number of Clients Citing Benefits (N=17)

Type of Benefit	Percentage	Frequency
Helped more people	65	11
Completed an extra task	47	8
Fostered better community relations	35	6
Cultivated a relationship with the university	24	4
Met a deadline	12	2
Other	6	1

tions from cocaine addiction, stated, "I plan to use it as an educational tool in an in-service type of environment. I also plan to condense the paper and put it into my monthly newsletter."

A high school dance coordinator asked her boss to forward a student's proposal for a performing arts high school to the county's board of education.

A public relations manager for the American Cancer Society promptly circulated a student's survey that attempted to gauge how much African American youths know about cancer. She reported that she was "currently sharing the document with [her] regional executive director and [her] cancer control manager." She added, "We will find the information most useful in determining ways to reach the African-American youth population related to cancer issues and tobacco use."

A manager for a community children's program raved about a children's health guide that a student had prepared for parents in her program. "I plan to share it with the parents and my colleagues," she wrote. "I also plan to use it in my summer program as well as [the after-school program]. Especially the exercise part. . . . Surely activities will be much more physical i.e. dodge ball, hopstoch [sic], kick ball & swimming."

Client vs. Teacher Evaluation of Documents

Although students and clients generally agreed about the value of the service-learning projects, the clients and I often disagreed about the value of the students' documents. At first glance, the clients and I appeared to hold similar views. When I added each set of scores for content, arrangement, and style and averaged the composite scores, the mean scores hovered around 11.50 (see Table 6). Furthermore, there was a weak but positive correlation (.54) between the clients' composite scores and mine (see Table 7).

But this apparent consensus disappeared when I studied the content, arrangement, and style scores more closely. Although there was no significant difference between our means for content and arrangement, our content and arrangement scores were not significantly correlated. And even though I discovered a positive and statistically significant correlation (.58) between the clients' style scores and mine, the correlation was weak (see Table 7). Moreover, my style scores were significantly lower than the clients' scores, $t(16) = -2.46$, $p < .03$ (see Table 6).

What happened? The clients' comments revealed five sources of disagree-

Table 6 • *Comparison of Teacher's and Clients' Mean Scores for 17 Student Documents*

	Teacher		Clients	
	M	SD	M	SD
Content	4.24	.83	3.81	.85
Arrangement	4.18	.81	4.09	.96
Style	3.15*	1.01	3.76	1.21
Composite Score	11.50	2.19	11.66	2.78

*p < .03

NOTE: Maximum score for content, arrangement, or style=5. Maximum composite score=15.

Table 7 • *Correlations between Teacher's and Client's Scores for 17 student documents*

Content	.33
Arrangement	.35
Style	.58*
Composite Score	.54**

* p < .02
** p < .03

ment: accuracy, methodology, originality, accessibility, and error.

Accuracy. Predictably, I did not recognize inaccuracies that horrified the clients, even though the majority of the documents were written in lay language. Fearing that I could not vouch for the accuracy of writing in so many "foreign" disciplines, I had insisted that technical advisors sign off on the students' documents. However, in two cases I had wrongly assumed that the clients (who were also the students' technical advisors) had reviewed the first drafts for accuracy. Later, I discovered that the students had never submitted the drafts to their client advisors.

In one instance, I gave a content score of 5.00 to a student's guide for parents of autistic children when it clearly deserved the client's 2.00. Dismayed, the clinical psychologist declared, "Much of the information is incorrect—for example, the techniques (reinforcement, extinction) are not technically correct and non-scientific information (subjective case studies) are not appropriate to disseminate. . . . Therefore, it would be inappropriate (& unethical) to give this manual to parents."

In the other case, a shelter administrator and I agreed on the content score (3.00) for a domestic violence guide for college students, but I reacted more negatively toward the "lack of attribution" and the student's failure to "integrate" her survey data into the body of the document. While the administrator also noted that the student had cited "very few references," her comments focused on inaccuracies. For example, she remarked, "I am not aware of any battered women's advocate who considers domestic violence to be an anger management issue." Elsewhere she wrote, " Terms like 'women with low self-esteem and a past history of abuse are primary targets for abuse' . . . seem victim-blaming and are widely considered to be untrue by the majority of battered women's advocates."

Methodology. Like accuracy, methodology was something I expected the technical advisors to check. However, since I had received graduate training in survey methodology, I felt reasonably confident when I scored a student's survey/proposal for a community technology center. Although I questioned the sampling procedure, I still awarded the student a content score of 4.50 for gathering a great deal of first-hand data and proposing a detailed curriculum for the center. However, the client—the director of the center—had been hired too late to direct the student's project, and she was quite displeased with the survey, which a less qualified assistant had commissioned. Citing deficiencies in the survey methodology, she gave the student a 3.00 and wrote, "The information is too general to be used [for] anything but anecdotal purposes."

Originality. The most surprising discrepancies in content scores did not arise from inaccuracies or flawed methodology: Two clients and I fully disagreed about the need for original research. In both cases, I had downgraded the content of a brochure because of "one-stop" research. To a brochure for a dance studio, I gave a content score of 3.75 because the student had relied almost entirely on the studio's flyers instead of gathering additional quotations, anecdotes, or facts from interviews and secondary sources. But the studio's dance coordinator awarded the brochure a perfect score of 5.00. For the other brochure, I settled on a content score of 2.75 because the student had drawn exclusively upon the youth program's website instead of conducting interviews or other research. Yet the program director awarded her a 4.00. When I asked him on the phone why he didn't mind the student's reliance on his website, he said the student's brochure packaged the information in a way that made it more appropriate for the target audience, a nearby community.

Accessibility. Because I teach document design in my technical writing course, I assumed that I would be better prepared to evaluate the documents' arrangement than their content. Anticipating the clients' concerns, I had instructed my students about the benefits of white space, graphics, headings, and other visual features that make a text accessible. However, despite my familiarity with readability research, I had not anticipated the clients' reactions to the design of certain documents.

The most striking discrepancy emerged when I recorded 2.75 for the arrangement of the survey for the American Cancer Society. I objected to the "dense paragraphs" of statistics, "missing references to tables," and the student's failure to number and caption tables. Yet the public relations manager stated that the document was "easy to read and follow," awarding it a perfect score of 5.00.

Error. As long as they could easily read a document, the clients were not as concerned as I was with errors. On average, I deducted significantly more style points because of grammatical and spelling errors. Consequently, six clients' style scores diverged dramatically from mine.

Three of the clients overlooked or failed to notice the errors that bothered me. Commenting on the style of the studio brochure, the studio dance coordinator declared, "I think anyone reading the booklet will clearly understand what the intent is." While I also jotted down "clarity" as the student's stylistic strength, I listed typos, omissions, subject-verb agreement errors, and missing –ed endings, which dropped my style score to 2.75—compared to the client's perfect 5.0. Judging from their scores, errors did not disturb the hospital administrator or the director of the youth outreach program either.

The other three clients mentioned errors in the students' documents, but did not penalize students as heavily as I did. The high school dance department chair noted that "a couple of places needed one more proofreading " but that did not stop her from giving the student a 5.0 for style instead of my 3.75. Clearly, she was not as distracted by the apostrophe, comma splice, and subject-verb agreement errors as I was. Likewise, while acknowledging "a few typographic errors," the public relations manager awarded a student a 5.0, but I recorded a 2.5 because of the typos and missing –s endings. The director of the community technology center was also more lenient than I was. She observed that the student's style was so "clumsy" that she "would not be able to share this with other organizations or staff without cleaning up the document." Yet instead of recording a 1.5 as I did, she chose 3.00.

Discussion

From a rhetorical perspective, what do these patterns of agreement and disagreement mean?

Students vs. Clients

First of all, since most of the students and clients agreed that the students' projects had helped the community, their agreement suggests that most students adapted their writing to the rhetorical situations for the service-learning tasks. To fulfill their clients' expectations as well as they did, they had to respond to the exigences, audiences, and constraints of each situation. I would like to think that the audience analyses that I assigned, the audience adaptation lessons I taught, or the sample documents I distributed helped students understand these rhetorical situations, but I suspect that they gained much of their understanding from observing and communicating with the clients and other people at the sites.

Considering the short time limits and the communication problems cited by Breuch, Blakeslee, and McEachern, I am gratified that so many students performed so well. As Bacon points out, we ask a lot of service-learners when we expect them to write in rhetorical situations that often require unfamiliar institutional or disciplinary background knowledge ("Community" 47). Perhaps so many of my students succeeded because I allowed them to choose a client but insisted that they seek one who needed research related to their major. When teachers choose the client, as is often the case, students may be unmotivated—or even at odds if they don't support the mission of the organization (Bacon "Community" 44-45; McEachern 216). On the other hand, when students can choose any client regardless of their skills, they may be poorly prepared to research and write for the organization. Presumably, because my students were writing and working with an advisor in their field, the majority of the students and clients reported that the students were "adequately prepared."

Nevertheless, the clients and the students did not always see eye to eye about the value of the students' work. Although the students' responses were anonymous, Table 1 indicates that at least four of the students whose work displeased clients were satisfied with their service-learning experience. Possibly, these were four of the five students who did not consult their clients or client-advisors. Regardless, this discrepancy suggests that a few students—like those cited by Breuch, Carrick, Himley, Jacob, and others—misunderstood their clients' needs or simply did not care.

Clients vs. Teacher

As for my disagreement with the clients about the students' documents, rhetorical theory might have predicted our differences. Not only was I unable to recognize inaccuracies because I lacked the appropriate disciplinary knowledge, but I lacked a strong sense of the rhetorical exigences and audiences that made the clients so concerned about the accuracy of the documents. Bitzer contends that an exigence is a felt need, "an imperfection marked by urgency, something waiting to be done. . . ." and that the audience mediates the change that the exigence invites (386). Thus, "rhetorical discourse," he says, "produces change by influencing the decision and action of persons who function as mediators of change" (387). Because both the exigences and intended audiences were immediate and real for them, the clinical psychologist and the shelter administrator feared that the students' documents could lead the parents or battered women who read them to decide or act in dangerous ways.

Presumably, my inadequate perception of the exigences and audiences also led me to deduct fewer points for the methodological shortcomings that I did recognize. For the director of the technology center, the methodological shortcomings carried far more weight because she had hoped to use the document, whereas I had not. Like the two business instructors that Ava Freedman, Christine Adam, and Graham Smart observed, I readily gave the student credit for evidence of learning in spite of deficiencies in the text. Yet, as Freedman and her colleagues point out, in the workplace "it is the text's quality that is paramount, and that quality is defined not by what the text reveals with respect to its writer's learning or knowledge but, rather, by what the text offers the reader in his institutional role, with a view toward institutional action" (208 my emphasis).

Rhetorical theory also predicts the seemingly unpredictable responses of the youth program director and studio dance coordinator to the student brochures that repackaged the organizations' flyer or website information. Apparently, for these clients the package was a gift in itself, but since I did not understand the clients' need for such a document, I was dissatisfied. Perhaps I would have understood its value had I realized how much the constraints on writing differ in the workplace and academe. As Freedman and her colleagues have documented, readers and writers in the workplace value originality less than academics do. On-the-job writing, they explain, "is resonant with the discourse of colleagues and the ongoing conversation of the institution. . . the fact of such intertextual borrowing is a reality and a perceived good" (210).

In short, the disparities in content scores are rooted in my detachment from the community-based rhetorical situation. I failed to consider specifically how the clients and their intended audiences might use the students' documents or the social action the documents might produce. Instead of usability, I thought about readability, i.e., whether the information was easy to locate, the organization easy to follow, and the language easy to read. Had I contemplated what decisions the parents or battered women might have made or what actions they might have taken as a result of reading the students' documents, I would have been more conscientious about verifying the accuracy of the content. Had I investigated what the technology center director, dance coordinator, and youth program director wanted to do with the documents, I might have adjusted my scores to take into account how usable the documents actually were. But I was too accustomed to evaluating what Joseph Petraglia calls "pseudotransactions"—assignments that "do not have to result in any action being taken, any attitude being changed."

I could evaluate papers in this manner because "pseudotransactions" fulfilled the exigence of the classroom situation, i.e., the need for students to demonstrate their learning and knowledge to the teacher for the purpose of evaluation (Freedman et al. 210). The difference between this exigence and the social needs of the service-learning sites may explain not only the diverging content scores but the diverging arrangement scores as well. Take, for instance, the arrangement of the cancer survey. Having taught my class about document design, I was probably more critical of the dense paragraphs than the public relations manager was because they revealed that the student had not learned what I had taught.

But what about the discrepancy in style scores, particularly the way the clients and I viewed grammatical and spelling errors? As Joseph Williams observes, such errors do not exist on a page; they represent "a flawed verbal transaction between a writer and reader" (158). In other words, error lies in the mind of the beholder. Thus said, it is easy to understand why I, with my linguistic training, could spot errors more easily than the dance coordinator, who omitted –ed endings and words in her own written commentary. But what about the hospital administrator and the youth program director? Were they unaware of errors because they did not know the rules? Perhaps. Or were the errors unimportant because of the way they planned to use the documents? After all, the hospital administrator decided to summarize the student's document in the hospital newsletter.

Each of these factors may have contributed to the variance in the style scores, but I suspect that my response to the classroom exigence played a critical role: Whereas the clients were reading primarily to extract meaning from each document and to assess its usefulness, I was reading primarily to assess the proficiency of the writer. Consequently, I probably allocated selective attention to errors. As Williams has demonstrated, had I read the documents as "unreflexively" as I read other texts, I might have found fewer errors (159).

I may also have reacted so negatively to errors because of how I perceived my role vis-a-vis the rhetorical situations presented by community service. Consider how Nancy reacted in Bacon's case study. Nancy focused on sentence structure in her service-learning course because she felt obliged to teach some transferable skills and assumed that a "concern for correctness" was common to the workplace as well as the classroom ("Building" 593, 595). Moreover, faced with unfamiliar service-learning assignments, she felt secure addressing grammar ("Building" 597). She was also concerned about correctness because she did not want "the students to embarrass themselves or the university" ("Building" 593). As my students' English teacher, I, too, was so embarrassed that I dreaded contacting clients about the poorly edited documents. However, the clients surprised me. They wrote much more vehemently about the deficiencies in content, openly accusing me, in one case, of lack of oversight. I still wonder, though, whether the errors would have bothered the clients more if the students had been members of the clients' staff. Then, perhaps, the clients might have felt responsible for the quality of the writing just as I did.

Whether my hunch is right or wrong, Bacon is right. The differences I have described show how "evaluating community service writing documents pushes us against the limits of our expertise" ("Community" 48). Because we are outsiders, "unfamiliar with the community agency's goals, the paper's audience, and the genre," says Bacon, "teachers who grade community-based writing on its own terms are essentially guessing what its outcome will be. . . . Worse, our distance from the rhetorical context may leave us ill prepared to offer useful guidance during the writing process" ("Community" 49).

Implications for Teaching and Future Research

This study offers an approach to inquiry that demonstrates that teachers can design and conduct manageable and productive classroom research on service-learning. In this study and others like it, however, the sample size is too small to generalize the findings. Thus, I urge teachers to consider collaborative approaches to research so that they can investigate the responses of larger groups of teachers, students, and clients. Teachers conducting research should solicit feedback from potential end-users as well. In this study, the clients and I had to imagine the responses of the end-users, whether they were parents of autistic children or battered wives. Even though the clients were familiar with their constituencies, feedback from the end-users might have shed more light on the usability of the documents.

To obtain more illuminating feedback from both clients and end-users, teachers should also design a writing questionnaire that elicits more specific responses to students' documents. For instance, instead of evaluating "content" as a whole, clients and end-users might assess "relevance," "informativeness," and "appropriateness" separately, assigning a score for each. Still, such an approach assumes that clients, end-users, and teachers share a vocabulary, and that may not be the case. Interviews would provide an important vehicle to explore that possibility and its implications.

Even with an improved research design, important pedagogical questions remain:

> How can we ensure that students understand and fulfill their clients' needs?
>
> How can we encourage students to value their community service writing?
>
> How can we obtain feedback from all clients and end-users before we grade students' documents?

These are some of the questions that I am attempting to answer this semester as I teach my service-learning course again. To help students satisfy their clients, I am monitoring more closely how students interact with their clients and technical advisors. For instance, I have asked all students to submit contracts signed by their clients and advisors early in the term (see Appendices A and B), and I have announced that I will not accept projects that clients have not approved or documents that advisors have not endorsed. I have also encouraged students to schedule an "information-gathering interview" (as Breuch recommends) to discuss the questions listed on the contract, such as "How will you use the document?" "What does the student need to know about the target audience?" and "What key questions should the document answer?" In addition, I have urged students to maintain e-mail contact with their clients as the project unfolds and, if they can find willing participants, to test their first drafts on end-users. Hopefully, this sort of communication will help students understand and fulfill their clients' needs. And, hopefully, as a result of their deeper understanding, they will value their writing as a form of social action.

I am less optimistic about obtaining feedback in time for grading. Since it took weeks for me to receive feedback from some clients in 2001, I wonder if I will ever receive feedback on the "presentation copies" from all 15-20 clients (and maybe just as many end-users) before I have to submit course grades. In "Juggling Teacher Responsibilities in Service-Learning Courses, " Cathy Sayer reports that she managed to obtain client feedback in time, but she sent e-mail and letters to only seven agencies and still found this evaluation process "complex and time-consuming" (21).

However, if I do not receive the feedback before grades are due, all is not lost. I can consult the clients' responses to the questions on the contract as I assess the students' documents. Moreover, the late feedback will not go to waste, for it will help me become a better teacher for my next technical writing class. As Melody Bowdon and J. Blake Scott observe, the more writing teachers are engaged in service-learning, the more they learn about the content, conventions, and culture of community organizations (20-21). Through that process, I am already learning to position myself "not as the sole expert in writing but as an investigator of language" (Bacon "Building" 600). Like Sayer, I "consider the community service partners the experts on how well . . . documents meet the needs of their organizations and constituencies" (21), and I am taking into account their expertise as I attempt to meet the needs of my students and university. In short, I am putting the "community" back into my evaluation of "community service writing" so that the community benefits and my students learn.

Author's Note

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Note

[1] All students' names are pseudonymns.

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Appendix A • Service-Learning Contract for Clients

Please take a few minutes to complete this form so that your student volunteer will know how to fulfill your agency's needs. However, remember that the student must also fulfill the requirements of Technical Writing ENGL 009-05. As a member of ENGL 009-05, the student must produce a researched document of approximately eight double-spaced pages (excluding visuals, references, and appendices) and meet the following deadlines:

Service-Learning Contract: February 3, 2003
Progress Report: March 28, 2003
First Draft: April 18, 2003
Revision: April 28, 2003
Presentation Copy: May 9, 2003

The student will submit the Presentation Copy to you as a hard copy and as a file on a disk.

If you have questions or concerns, e-mail or call Dr. Teresa M. Redd [contact information follows]

Contact Information

Your Name	**Telephone/Fax**
Your Agency	**Email**
Street Address	**Web Site**

Project Guidelines

1. What kind of document do you want the student to produce? (Circle one.)
   Note: If you require a particular format, please give the student a model from your files.

research report	feasibility study	manual	guide
proposal	newsletter	brochure	other (specify)

2. How will you use the document (e.g., to inform clients, to formulate a policy, to seek funding)?

3. What does the student need to know about the target audience of the document (e.g., the age range or educational level)?

4. What key questions should the document answer?
   Note: if you want the student to conduct a survey or interviews, list the most important questions that should appear on the student's questionnaire.
   a.
   b.
   c.
   d.
   e.

5. How do you want the student to find the information? (Circle one or more.)

agency files	interviews	survey	field observation
experiment	library research	internet research	other (specify)

6. What does the student need to know about your agency (e.g., the mission)?
   Note: If you have a flyer, brochure, or website about your agency, please share it with the student.

Agreement

We accept these guidelines for the ENGL 009-05 service-learning project.

Client's Signature and Date ______________________________
Student's Signature and Date ______________________________

Appendix B • Instructions for Technical Advisors

Please complete the form below if you are willing to serve as the technical advisor for my service-learning project in Technical Writing ENGL 009-05. Because of your expertise in my field of study, I need your help in the following ways:

To recommend sources, contacts, or research methods (by mid-February).

To review a two-page research proposal (due in February).

To review an eight-page draft of my service-learning document (due in April).

YOU DO NOT NEED TO MARK OR GRADE MY DOCUMENTS. Simply advise me (in your office or via e-mail) about any problems with the accuracy, methodology, or (if applicable) disciplinary conventions governing format or citations. If the document is sound, SIGN IT to confirm that it meets your approval. Once you have approved the document, my professor will comment on its development, organization, design, and language, requesting revisions if needed.

If you have any questions or concerns, contact my professor, Dr. Teresa M. Redd [contact information].

I have read the instructions for technical advisors for the ENGL 009-05 service-learning projects, and I agree to advise ______________________________ this semester.
(student's name)

Signature and Date ___________________________________

Name (printed)	Telephone
Title	Email
Organization	Fax

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