

REFLECTIONS

ON COMMUNITY-BASED WRITING INSTRUCTION

Volume I, Number 1

Spring, 2000

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Welcome to *Reflections*

Nora Bacon

Barbara Sherr Roswell

In the past fifteen years, American colleges and universities have embraced service-learning with active enthusiasm. Campus Compact, the national service-learning organization of university presidents, began in 1985 with three members; today, it has almost 700 member campuses where students annually engage in an estimated 22 million hours of service activities linked to their academic studies. Hundreds of faculty members have found their teaching invigorated as they have observed the impact of service-learning projects on the community and on students' personal and intellectual growth.

Given our profession's historical commitments--to a vision of teaching and learning which addresses cognitive, affective, and social development, to a vision of writing which recognizes its power to effect personal, practical, and political change--it is not surprising that interest in service-learning has been particularly strong among writing instructors. At many institutions, writing teachers are among the early adopters who reach out to community members to establish service-learning partnerships and who take leadership roles on campus, explaining the why and the how of service-learning to their colleagues in other departments.

And we, like our students, learn from experience. Having experimented with various models of community-based writing instruction for the past decade, we have learned enough to see that service-learning is more than good pedagogy: it's an innovation with theoretical significance, one that challenges us to reexamine our thinking about writing, teaching, learning, community, service, poverty, privilege, responsibility, justice. Individually and collectively, we have found that our reflections on community-based writing instruction are provocative enough to warrant a new forum for sharing our insights and extending our inquiry.

As the editors of *Reflections*, we have taken great pleasure in reading the articles submitted to us over the past few months. We have been struck by the energy, commitment, thoughtfulness, and creativity of so many writing teachers who incorporate service into their courses. We have observed a sense of excitement, a feeling of being involved in something important, inclusive and transformative, reminiscent of composition studies itself during the 1970s and 80s as the field was being defined.

The pieces submitted for this first issue of *Reflections* represent a remarkable range of perspectives--considerations of service-learning in high schools and colleges; of writing by college freshmen and upperclassmen; of community-based work with children, immigrant farmers and senior citizens. They include papers that focus on assignments, on the contours of an entire course, on developing a theoretical and epistemological self-consciousness about literacy; papers that offer suggestions and critiques of how our relationships with community partners are organized. We have seen teachers being thoughtful about audience and purpose, about the unique challenges of the freshman year, about the unique challenges of international students. And we have seen scholars celebrating meaningful connections with engaged and diverse communities.

In the following pages, Tom Deans places *Reflections* within the context of an important set of commitments within NCTE/CCC to making community-based writing a more central concern within the profession. Mary Vermillion offers an ambitious and carefully crafted sequence of assignments designed to make service a meaningful component of a writing course and of the first-year experience as a whole. Hannah Ashley and Michael Martin describe first-year writing courses that involve students in writing with senior citizens and children, respectively, not only enabling us to consider how varied successful partnerships can be, but also inviting a conversation about the interpretations of literacy and language we enact in our courses and the ways that community-based writing courses (and their teachers) evolve and mature.

Kathy Megyeri, one of the pioneers of the service-learning requirement in Maryland high schools, shares creative approaches to integrating service into a broadly defined language arts curriculum. The multi-dimensional vision of community-building that emerges from her experience promises to offer inspiration to teachers at all levels. In an interesting juxtaposition, Cathy Sayer reflects on nearly a decade of experience teaching service-learning courses, exploring the hidden complexities and labor involved in creating and maintaining the partnerships which, she argues, constitute one of the core commitments of community-based instruction.

To demonstrate the direction of current scholarship and to invite cooperation among researchers, we offer abstracts of two dissertations: Risa Gorelick describes her effort to unpack the definitions of "community" operating in service-learning courses, and Adrian Wurr previews his study of the impacts of service-learning on native and non-native speakers of English. Gorelick and Wurr have included their e-mail addresses in order to encourage networking among service-learning researchers.

The issue closes with two short pieces. "Terreno" is a short story by Zachary Knapp, a senior at CSU Monterey Bay who participated in a university-sponsored service project with the Rural Development Center. As Knapp recre-

ates a telling moment in his relationship with an immigrant farmer, he illustrates the spirit of respect and reciprocity which characterizes service-learning at its best. Of special value to newcomers to community-based writing — and to those who want to initiate others — is Linda Adler-Kassner's overview of service-learning, followed by an annotated list of key print and on-line resources.

As the inaugural issue of *Reflections* goes to press, we look forward to preparing future issues. Please join the conversation. Become a subscriber, and consider writing an article to share your own reflections on community-based writing instruction.

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Reflections on Community-Based Writing Instruction is funded by a grant from the Campus Compact Fund for National Disciplinary Associations with additional support from Goucher College.

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Subscription Information

Reflections is published three times a year (fall, winter and spring). Subscription to *Reflections* is \$10 per year. Make checks payable to "Reflections." Address subscription orders, information requests and changes of address to:

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