

## Research Spotlight

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# Broadening the Community: Service-Learning Connections to the Writing Classroom

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In the past few years, many English departments have welcomed the burgeoning area of service-learning into their curriculums, a development which Adler-Kassner, Cooks and Watters consider a “microrevolution” in the area of college-level composition (1). While compositionists have become increasingly thoughtful about different models for community-based writing – in Tom Deans’ schema, writing for, about or with the community – the literature has yet to explore the definition of “community” integral to each of these approaches. As Joseph Harris pointed out in his article “The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing” a decade ago, the idea of community has “extraordinary rhetorical power” yet the word “community” has no negative term; in fact, the term “community” is not even found in a college-level thesaurus. What and where is the ubiquitous “community” talked about in the service-learning literature? Is one community the same as the other? Are we all talking about one generic community or does the term vary from writing to writing? By uncovering the over-reliance on this term, we may begin to see why those who write on this subject do little to define the meaning of community.

To facilitate a better understanding of the multiple communities involved in service-learning writing classes, my dissertation examines the “writing about” and “writing for” service-learning models. Students involved in the “writing about service” course are first-year students in a researched-based writing class at a small private Maryland college. These students, all women, learn to negotiate the term community based on the fieldwork they complete at a number of service locations in conjunction with their reflective and research-based writing. Students involved in the “writing for service” are juniors and seniors at an open admission Louisiana State University enrolled in advanced exposition and technical writing classes. In these courses, students, whose writing for non-profit agencies is the focus of their service, explore issues of audience and purposes within the context of the perceived communities of their agencies.

By examining students’ writing from each group, the dissertation uncovers that students’ idea of community does not necessarily match the idea of community portrayed in the service-learning literature. My dissertation offers an expanded definition of the term “community” in light of the interviews, survey data and writing samples collected from students and makes connections that will enable other humanities educators to implement service-learning writing projects with a better understanding of the assumptions about community on which their work relies. This more complete understanding promises to benefit all who are involved: instructors, students, agencies, and clients.

### Works Cited

- Adler-Kassner, Linda, Robert Cooks, and Ann Watters, eds. *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition*. Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1997.
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- Harris, Joseph. “The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing.” *College Composition and Communication* 40 (1989): 11-22.

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