

# Terreno

Zachary Knapp

For a few thick moments apricots orbit in sunny colonies, and then, with a *whoosh*, the tree and fruit whip past. On this country road, row after orchard row disappears behind us and our eyes re-focus, only for a moment, on the fleeting trees, glimmering leaves, and crimson fruits ahead. Alejandro slows down as one by one, signs replace trees. “Private Property, No Trespassing” on the left, “Beware of Dog” and “McMurtry Brothers Fencing” on the right. Gravel grates and crunches under the Chevy’s tires, stating our presence like signal guns. The flatbed’s hooks and boards bounce, clang, and rattle. I imagine an old shopping cart rolling through a cobble-floored monastery. Alejandro eases his truck up the gravel road to the brown, one-story wood and stucco ranch house. We’ve driven up and down old, crumbly edged roads for the last hour, but now he’s sure this is the place. In line next to the house is an immediate family of carport, garage, and three sheds all the same color. He parks near the sheds and I follow his lead as he opens his door.

“¿Ellos saben que estamos viniendo?” I ask one more time, hoping we are expected. He answers as he did before, a quick “Si” and then an even quicker explanation. Torrents of Spanish rush through my ears and I try to catch familiar words and piece sentences together. I don’t understand everything when he speaks so fast.

A plastic tricycle, two miniature bikes, and other toys spill out of the carport on the path to the front door. My friend and I walk side by side as if we were partners in this venture. I like this feeling as we talk about land, the number of wells and irrigation potential, the future crops we want to try. My imagination whirls in dreams about farming, marketing schemes, and growing melons in a warm valley away from the coastal fog. I wish I were in the land hunt with Alejandro. Instead of school, I’d spend the next year learning from, and farming with, my friend and mentor. I realize though that I haven’t earned it yet like Alejandro. It’s his time, and mine will come if I can match his perseverance.

Alejandro slows down as we approach the door. It opens before we get there. I’m suddenly in front as he steps back behind me. The immediacy of my task swoons over me like the smell of freshly harvested cilantro, and I don’t feel qualified for the position he just gave me.

A stocky and weathered man stands in the doorway. His tanned skin, strong build, and well-used Wranglers draw my mind back to the “McMurtry Brothers” sign and the cattle fences we passed on the way here. A gruff “Hi” breaks through his bushy light brown and gray mustache. He doesn’t smile, and it’s obvious he wants an explanation for

the kid with a blonde pony tail and the middle-aged Mexican man behind him. Thinking back to the “No Trespassing” signs on the road, I get the feeling he doesn’t answer his door much.

The explanation is mine to give; Alejandro doesn’t speak English. He brought me here to help translate in his search for farming land to lease next season. I feel the vertigo of a newborn calf’s first shaky step as I stand between the rancher with land and my Mexican friend who needs land.

“Hi,” I say. The adrenaline that gets me through last-minute class presentations kicks in.

“I’m Zachary and this is Alejandro.” He steps out of the doorway and takes my extended hand. I consciously look him in the eye and match his firm grasp, our hands like coupling railroad cars. This is how I learned to make a good impression, and I know he was taught the same.

“I’m Bill,” he says and shakes Alejandro’s hand. I get a sense the railroad cars didn’t couple, one just bumped the other. Without stepping forward, Alejandro muffles a quick “Hi,” and looks at me instead of the rancher.

“Alejandro is looking for land to rent next season. Is this the right place? You do have land for rent, don’t you?” Before he can answer I add, “He doesn’t speak English, and so I’m here just to translate.

“We might have land. Green Organics hasn’t decided yet if they want the extra fifty acres we’re rentin’ out this year.” He makes it clear they have first priority. Feeling we’re already behind, I try to give him some background.

“Alejandro is farming right now on land owned by a small farm education program that’s targeted to Spanish-speaking folks and their families. He graduated from this program two years ago, and now his time is up to stay on this land, and he needs new land to rent.” The words stream out in a single breath, my hands beckoning forward as if they could speed his understanding. I can tell he doesn’t get it.

Alejandro stands still behind me. I turn so I can speak to them both. For the first time, my friend is without his almost cocky confidence. Not understanding what the man with the mustache said about the land on which his future might depend, he droops like a wet towel.

“*El dijo que un otra compania possible va rentar el terreno, y este compania tiene el prioridad,*” I translate to Alejandro in my simple Spanish, the language he and the other farmers in the program help me with every day.

“I have to talk to my dad and my brother about it,” Bill adds.

“*El tiene que hablar con su padre y hermano acerca esto.*”

"We'll probably know in a few days."

*"Ellos probablemente van decidir en pocos dias."*

Alejandro nods and looks only at me. The roles have changed. I wish it were the usual way, with me looking to him. My stomach doubles over like kneaded dough as I try to think of what to ask next. I am responsible for representing my friend, making an impression for him. How can it be that suddenly he can't represent himself? I want Bill to see Alejandro as I know him. The man with the big blue Ford tractor, the newest tractor on the farm. The farmer who started with nothing six years ago and now has the tractor and its implements, three flatbed trucks, and people working for him every day. He harvests almost every morning, starting work when most people's alarms are an hour away from ringing. Often I see him doing tractor work until nine or ten at night. He told me about the mildew in my beets before I even thought to check for it, and he is the one the others and I go to with our questions.

These things aren't something you put on a resume; you don't hand the man you want to rent from your tractor shop receipt, or a log of last week's hours. You don't have someone else tell him that you're respected and looked up to. These accomplishments come out in character, they come out when you meet someone and leave them with a positive feeling. In my culture, the hand and the eye are so important, confidence is important. How do I do this for someone else? How can Bill really meet Alejandro when Alejandro is too intimidated and self-conscious to face him at my side? I wonder if Bill realizes the power disparity in the situation. Will he rent land to a man he can't talk to? A man he only knows by translation through some long-haired kid?

I'm not sure what to say next.

"So it's fifty acres?" It sounds like an intelligent question.

"Yeah, it's that parcel past this first pasture on the other side of the road." Bill points to the stubby bronze field with a back wall of sun bleached mountains. It is the field we veered away from to drive up to his house.

"Is the land certified organic?" I ask, trying to do the business my friend brought me here to do. Alejandro has told me it is, but shouldn't I double check.

"It's all ready to be, nothing but cows have been on it for at least . . . I don't know, forty years."

I translate to Alejandro. He looks at me and says, "*Si*." At this point the three of us don't know what to do. Bill reaches in his back pocket and pulls out his wallet.

"Here's my card to get a hold of me." He hands me a card with the *McMurtry Brothers Fencing* logo. "Does he have a number where I can get a hold of him?" he asks, nodding toward Alejandro. I turn to my friend, his expression more confused than before.

*"¿Tienes una numero donde El puede llamarte?"*

"*Si, tengo*," he says and pulls a stack of assorted business cards from his wallet. Soft with rounded corners,

the cards advertise tractor repair, irrigation supplies, seed companies, and brokers promising good returns. Shuffling through them, he finds one he doesn't need and looks up. I can tell he wants a pen and I hand him the one in my pocket. We huddle together as he crosses out the business logo and carefully prints his name and cell phone number.

"*Este es mi celular*," he says. And hands the card to me. I pass it to Bill. He glances at it and says he'll let us know next week.

"Great, thank you," I force out enthusiasm.

"But I don't know," he adds. "You got to think what a big operation like Green Organics will say. Are they going to want to deal with having a little guy next door?"

Bill turns to go back into his door and stops.

"How much is he expecting to pay?" he asks, again looking at me with a nod toward Alejandro. On the way here, Alejandro told me what they were asking.

"Uh, about two fifty an acre, more or less."

"That's in the ballpark," he replies and shuts the door. Without speaking, Alejandro and I walk back to his truck. We drive out the way we came, the land for rent directly in front of us.

*"Esta bien, este terreno,"* Alejandro says one more time.

\* \* \*

It's Friday evening, a week after our trip to look at the land and Alejandro hasn't heard back from Bill. Alejandro and I stand in front of his truck, and he asks me to call for him. This time of day an orange glow creeps over the fields. First basting the tips of flowering corn, it drizzles down stalks, creeps through branches, trickles over leaves, and finally ignites the low-lying lettuce and new seedlings. A moist northwest wind presses against our jackets; it warns of a fog battalion, mounted and advancing towards us. He dials and hands me the phone.

"Hello."

"Hi, may I speak to Bill please?"

"Speaking."

"Hi Bill, this is Zachary Knapp. I came out last week with Alejandro and talked to you about the land for rent." Before I can ask if it's available, he jumps in.

"Nope, sorry, we don't have any land for you."

"Oh, OK," I say, not expecting such quick denial.

"OK, bye." He hangs up.

I look up at Alejandro. He knows the call was too short. Once again, for a split second, he looks different, heavy shoulders, powerless like an engine stalled on a hill's crest. He straightens, regains his poise, and looks past me to the fields.

*"Esta bien. Yo se de otro ranchos con mejor terreno."*

I know it's a bluff. He'll never be a victim in front of me, or to himself.

## The Author

Zachary Knapp is a senior at California State University, Monterey Bay. He writes:

*Two years ago, I took a community-based service-learning course (required at CSUMB) that connected me with the Rural Development Center (RDC), a local small farm education program. The RDC teaches Spanish-speaking individuals and families how to start and manage their own organic farming businesses. It's an incredible empowerment program here in the Salinas Valley where Spanish-speaking farm workers compose a large part of the population. My service at the RDC has ranged from field work with student farmers to a liaison between farmers and their English-speaking customers.*

*The service assignment evolved into my senior research project on organic farming and more involvement with RDC farmers. My close relationship and work with the farmers constantly raises issues of power, privilege, economics, culture, and language barriers.*

*"Terreno" reflects these issues. I started the story in an introductory creative writing class titled "Writers as Witness" taught by Frances Payne Adler. The class centered around social action writing, using words to "break silences" about our world and what we see. In this way social activism and creative writing become one and the same—where the student practices a genre in a context of social consciousness.*

# Service-Learning at a Glance

Linda Adler-Kassner

*Editors' Note: This article originally appeared in COLLEGE CYBERBRIEF, an electronic newsletter sent to members of the College Section of TEACH2000. Reprinted with permission of the National Council of Teachers of English. The list of electronic resources appeared in Adler-Kassner's CyberBrief; we've updated the list a bit and added some print materials.*

In the last ten years, projects designated as "service-learning" experiences have become enormously popular. Unfortunately, that popularity has also led to a certain amount of confusion about what service-learning is.

Service-learning is different from "community service." At its core, it involves linking the subject of a class with work in a nonprofit community organization and reflecting on that experience in some structured way (in journals or essays, for example). Service-learning can be a terrific strategy for helping students realize the power of language, gain broad experience with a variety of genres, and better understand themselves as parts of larger communities. To facilitate this, it's important to plan carefully and be prepared to learn along with your students.

Look before you leap into service-learning. It's important to be clear—for yourself, for the agencies with whom you work, for your students and possibly for your institution—about why you want to incorporate it into your course. Ask yourself: "What do I want students to get out of my course? What activities will help them get it? Where does service-learning fit in?" Wanting to help students become good citizens is a great start—but what's the connection between that and becoming a good writer (however you define that)? The kind of service-learning experience you incorporate in your course should be closely tied to what you want students to get out of it.

Service-learning courses come in all shapes and sizes. Service-learning doesn't have to be at the center of all of your assignments (it can be the focus of even one or two), and you can approach it from

various perspectives. Tom Deans has identified three models for service-learning that are most frequently used in composition courses:

1) Writing *for* community. Community-related work here involves students' writing documents for nonprofit agencies as a part of their work in the course. For the agencies, students might write brochures, grant proposals, articles for newspapers, newsletters, or other material circulating within the agency or to a wider audience.

2) Writing *about* community. In this model, students examine experiences working with or for community organizations in papers they write for class. Typically, this model involves students working with literacy issues in a community organization: as literacy tutors, mentors, or guides. However, agency work need not be limited to literacy-related opportunities.

3) Writing *with* community. Here, students work with community members to identify issues that community members want to work on. Together, they decide how to approach the issue and what kind of document(s) to produce to address the issue. Within this model, students are able to reflect on elements included in writing for and writing about community.

Whether adapting an existing model or creating a mix, the instructor of a service-learning course must be particularly thoughtful and deliberate about the relationship between course goals and service activities. By way of example, consider three conceptual approaches to composition instruction. First, there's the "discourse community" model—the idea that composition instruction should help students to build bridges between their own discourses and academic discourses. This is a "skills-