

# “You’re Not Alone”:

## An Interview with Tom Deans about Supporting Community Engagement

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*This interview is not the first in Reflections for Tom Deans, a Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at the University of Connecticut. His first interview appeared in issue 1.1 of Reflections and focused on his work as chair of the recently created CCCC national service-learning committee dedicated to creating “disciplinary momentum” around service learning. He has a career-long interest in community-engaged writing and research, and served as both a Senior Editor and the Book Review Editor for Reflections over several years. In this interview, he reflects on the beginning of Reflections, the emergence of composition’s interest in service learning, and the growth of institutional support and recognition of community engagement. Overall, he finds that despite its early modest aspirations, the field’s trajectory has resulted in a large amount of exciting and important work, and provided a “real viable pathway” for educators who want to build a career around community engagement.*

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**T**om Deans was interviewed for the first issue of *Reflections*, as he was the chair of the recently formed CCCC Service-Learning Committee

established in 1999 and the author of *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*, which had just been published by NCTE. In later years, he was Book Review Editor for *Reflections*, and he is currently a Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at the University of Connecticut. He has a career-long interest in community-engaged writing and research. For this *Reflections* 20<sup>th</sup>-anniversary issue, we thought it would be interesting to return to the questions and themes from that original interview to reflect on the beginning of this journal, as well as changes since then in how we think about and practice community engagement.

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Eric Mason (EM): In the first issue of *Reflections*, you were not listed as part of the editorial team, but you were involved in the journal's creation, and you were interviewed based on your chairing the recently created CCCC national service-learning committee. Can you first tell us how that committee came to be?

Tom Deans (TD): In the 1990s, there was a lot of excitement across higher education about community engagement. There were national groups like Campus Compact, and locally, universities were founding or expanding campus outreach centers. Terms like "service learning" and the related research were mainly coming out of education, and there wasn't much going on in composition studies, despite our being socially minded due to our roots in rhetoric, and a few early articles having been published by scholars such as Bruce Herzberg. I had done some service learning in the classroom and, when a committee formed at UMass, my name was forwarded by my dissertation director, and I found myself in a very cross-disciplinary group including people from public health, education, and chemical engineering. I ended up writing a dissertation on community-engaged pedagogies, and Nora Bacon, who was one of the first editors of *Reflections* (along with Barbara Roswell), was likewise doing her dissertation in service learning.

We early adopters weren't trying to become a major force in rhetoric and composition; we just wanted to reach that threshold

where we could find ways of connecting with others—sharing research, teaching materials, and curriculum models. A call was put out for those interested in the CCCC national service-learning committee being created under the leadership of then CCCC chair Victor Villanueva, and Nora and I were among those selected to be on it, along with Rosemary Arca, Louise Rodriguez Connal, Barbara Roswell, and Linda Flower, who we were fortunate to have as a member due to the gravitas she brought. The committee operated from 1999-2005 and was a diverse and energetic group.

EM: Can you describe what that committee accomplished and the role it and any other groups played in the creation of *Reflections*?

TD: The field of rhetoric and composition was excited at that time about critical pedagogies with a strong social justice impulse, and we were hearing enthusiasm from campuses and organizations excited to do more community-based work. In trying to build on these energies to create something that was really customized to our field, the committee advocated to quite literally put us on the program at the CCCC conventions from 1999 to 2001 in more formal ways through a special interest group, special plenary sessions, and workshops. We also launched a website that gathered links to resources for those interested in service learning in composition. Though we drafted a position statement on service learning, we didn't get that over the finish line; however, a CCCC committee formed years later succeeded in getting that done, and it continues to be part of the resources that people can use today.

The real credit for creating *Reflections* goes to its first editors, Barbara Roswell and Nora Bacon, and those who worked with them. The committee's role in *Reflections* was mainly in helping to secure a grant from the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) to support its creation by funding printing and the design of a website. The AAHE—a fairly big player in higher ed at the time, but now defunct—was part of a national conversation trying to create disciplinary momentum around service learning. They made grants and also supported a series of edited collections on service learning in the disciplines, the

first of which was *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition*, a text published in cooperation with NCTE and Campus Compact.

EM: I remember the resource website you mentioned, though, to my knowledge, it is no longer available online. What are the most important repositories today for community-engaged teaching, research, and writing?

TD: Emerging fields often have relatively few resources. For instance, you might have a few edited collections rather than lots of monographs, or you might have one or two websites that are trying to aggregate what everyone across the country is doing—and that’s what that initial website was. It was just basically saying to people: “You’re not alone; there are people and programs out there you can look to even if they’re in Washington state and you’re in South Carolina.” At that time, there was a scarcity of resources, so centralizing made sense. Nowadays, there’s an abundance of resources, so I never point people to one source anymore. Rather, I say, “Go to the Conference on Community Writing; read *Reflections*; read the *Community Literacy Journal* (CLJ); read the books coming out; read the dissertations coming out.” I’m perfectly fine with things like that website becoming obsolete because it meant we grew a much more robust and diverse set of resources, ones that are now almost too abundant to keep track of. But I think it’s characteristic of early movements to have a more centralized place to share information, and that’s part of what *Reflections* was as well.

Remember, too, that *Reflections* started as a newsletter, and when momentum started building and people were doing more research, we followed the path of academic legitimacy by thinking, “Well, journals have more prestige than newsletters.” But I think newsletters and upstart websites are also good grassroots modes of organizing and networking—so that first website was important, but it was quite ad hoc as I posted links people were sending me and curated it as best I could. But at a certain point it became a bit futile because there was too much for one website.

EM: The title of that first interview was “CCCC Institutionalizes Service-Learning,” and you remarked in it that establishing the CCCC committee was one way to “foster the institutionalization of service-learning.” What, in your view, are the most important markers that this process has been successful?

TD: I am less excited today about the word “institutionalization” than I was when I was twenty-nine years old or so and trying to figure out how to make my way in a profession. But that bid for respectability and recognition—where you’re saying, “Take me seriously”—is really important developmentally for movements as well as for individuals. If you could have told me twenty years ago that there would be not just one journal—*Reflections*—but that the *CLJ* would be founded a few years later, and then there would be a very vibrant Conference on Community Writing every other year, and that there would be enough books out there to have an annual outstanding book award in civic engagement and community literacy, I would have said: that’s more institutionalization than I would have expected.

Our aspirations were pretty modest at the time, and I couldn’t be happier with how the field’s trajectory has led to a real viable pathway for newcomers to find their way into community-engaged research and teaching. I pretty regularly now mentor graduate students who want to build a career around community engagement, and once you get to the point of having journals, conferences, books, and interested Ph.D. students, you have an academic subspecialty where the real issue becomes sustaining it and continuing to grow it in ways that may be somewhat unpredictable, but where, hopefully, newcomers can become leaders and take us in interesting directions. There are certainly some avenues of community engagement that I wouldn’t have expected twenty years ago, and that I’ve since become really excited about, like the community publishing work that Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt started in Philadelphia.

EM: In the same year that *Reflections* was first published, your book *Writing Partnerships* came out in which you described three paradigms for community-engaged writing: writing for

the community, writing *about* the community, and writing *with* the community. How has your thinking about these paradigms changed since that time?

TD: It was kind of the interviewer to ask about that book in the original interview, and talking about it now may seem a bit self-indulgent, but I think those categories of for/about/with have held up pretty well. But they're also just a heuristic, a tool for sharpening our thinking about assumptions embedded in practice and to prompt questions about how different kinds of courses and programs embody different forms of literacy, social action, and ideology as well as different definitions of authorship, collaboration, change, process, and audience.

Here's the origin story for those paradigms: a few years before that interview, I attended a CCCC workshop on service learning being held by folks from Carnegie Mellon, Bentley, and Stanford, and, while I was really energized by the workshop, I was also confused because there were very different courses being presented to us under the same heading of "service learning." I remember just sitting down in the hallway during one of the breaks and trying to sketch something out that would help me understand how all of these projects could be animated by the same impulses toward social action but still operate so differently. In classical terms, the categories became for me a mode of invention to help think through these different models and interrogate why someone might default to a certain model. We have choices to make as we teach and work with community groups, choices that depend on our goals and our values, and if those categories help us be more self-conscious and deliberate about those choices, they've done their job. I think the for/about/with heuristic doesn't hold up as well once you move away from the scene of the classroom and the semester-long course to other kinds of projects and networks, which has become more common in community engagement.

EM: At the time of the original interview, you were using community-engaged writing in various courses. Do you continue to use these approaches in courses you teach, and, if so, how has your use of them changed?

TD: I teach less now than I did when that interview was published because I became a writing program administrator and have been so for all of the last twenty years. But I try to teach first-year writing with some degree of regularity and, when I do teach it, I teach it with a community component. Since those early days, genre and circulation have become bigger themes in my courses, as they have in the field, but the same basic arrangement holds in that I gather my students into teams to work for organizations, and then shepherd them through that writing process as they negotiate both the academic and the community expectations for those projects. The “writing for the community” model is one that I also use in some advanced classes too, but I’m also teaching more grad classes nowadays and have not done as much service learning in those because fewer take up the theme of community engagement.

EM: You mentioned your work as a writing administrator, and you are currently the Director of the University Writing Center at the University of Connecticut. Has your experience in community-engaged writing affected your approach to operating a writing center?

TD: Very much so. When I became a writing center director in 2005, I spent a lot of my time and energy thinking about how a writing center can do community engagement. There were already some models emerging in the early 2000s for this, such as community writing centers that welcome citizens onto campus and into libraries. At the University of Connecticut, we’ve developed an approach that focuses on partnering with secondary schools to assist them in launching a peer writing center. We’ve worked with fifty to sixty middle and high schools across the state, and more intensively with about a dozen schools, to help them start their own writing centers. If interested in that model, you can read its history and practices in an article I co-authored with Jason Courtmanche (*WPA Journal*, issue 42.2). That’s where a lot of my community engagement efforts have been—not focused on any particular course, but instead on building a network in partnership with our local National Writing Project chapter, which has long been working with local teachers who value how students can use writing as a tool for learning and action.

EM: What do you believe are currently the most pressing issues for scholars and teachers of community-engaged writing?

TD: Something I was naive about twenty years ago but now strikes me as central is how important labor issues are in a field where we have majority part-timers or graduate students teaching first-year writing. Community-engaged writing pedagogies involve relationship-intensive work that is best done over the long term. This work is really hard to do under the best of circumstances but becomes untenable under conditions of precarity. Even established, secure faculty can get drawn away from developing quality sustainable partnerships and courses by research or administrative demands, but I'm more concerned about the majority of first-year writing instructors who don't really have the opportunity to do this work because of labor conditions, even though they have the impulses to do this kind of work.

EM: Our trajectory as a field has been, and continues to be, hopeful, however, and projects like *Reflections* represent our long-term interest in finding the resources to make something more promising happen for the community and for our students. Being reminded that we are not alone in these hopes and endeavors is an important part of why these projects were created in the first place.



## REFERENCES

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