Transforming Failures into Threshold Moments:
Supporting Faculty through the Challenges of Service-Learning

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This article makes two arguments. First, the article argues that threshold concepts provide a useful lens for thinking about how faculty learn service-learning pedagogy. Second, the article illustrates how particular kinds of support can help faculty learn the pedagogy's threshold concepts by helping them make sense of the challenges they face in teaching through service-learning. The author uses autoethnography to trace her thinking throughout a yearlong fellows program, during which she developed and taught a new service-learning writing curriculum. She describes how the fellows program helped her to turn several challenges into threshold experiences that resulted in key shifts in thinking.

Recent Rhetoric and Composition scholars have called for more discussion of the failures and challenges of service-learning (see Cushman and Grabill; Rumsey and Nihiser; and Rousculp). My recent experiences developing and teaching a new service-learning curriculum for a place-based writing course involved many such failures and challenges. In this article, I seek to bring these disappointing moments to light and show how

the support I received through a faculty fellows in service-learning program enabled me to make sense of them. With the support of this program, challenges became "threshold experiences" that allowed me learn the foundational—or threshold—concepts of service-learning pedagogy. Meyer and Land, who coined the term, write that a threshold concept "represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress" (1). The notion of threshold concepts has typically been used to describe *student* learning (see Adler-Kassner, Majewski, and Koshnick and Adler-Kassner and Wardle), but recent scholars argue that threshold concepts may also provide a useful frame for considering how faculty members learn service-learning pedagogy (see Harrison, Clayton, and Tilley-Lubbs and Tilley-Lubbs).

Like students entering a new discipline, faculty must cross the threshold into particular ways of thinking as they learn to teach through service-learning. They may experience troubling, uncomfortable moments throughout the process, particularly since service-learning challenges the hierarchical, teacher-up-front nature of traditional teaching. Many faculty experience outright failures during the process, and the ability to learn from these failures is critical to their continuing and improving as service-learning teachers. In this article, I offer four possible threshold concepts of service-learning pedagogy. These four concepts are all transformations in my understanding of service-learning pedagogy that I experienced during my year participating in the fellows program while developing and teaching a new service-learning writing curriculum: 1. The need to place student learning at the center of the experience, 2. The importance of learning alongside students, 3. The connection between sustainability and reciprocity, and 4. The value of reflecting on action and in action. I will show how my shifts in thinking shared one major ingredient: they all happened when I experienced a challenge or even failure that was transformed into a threshold moment by the support of the fellows program.

These kinds of programs offer great potential for promoting productive university-community relationships and raising the profile of service-learning. Scholars in higher education administration and faculty development research have investigated the efficacy of

service-learning faculty fellows programs (see Bowen and Kiser and Harwood et al.). In this article, I build on their work by using autoethnography to show how my involvement in this yearlong, university-wide program helped me make sense of the challenges that I faced and learn the pedagogy's threshold concepts. Not all institutions will replicate the fellows program in which I participated. Rather than argue that they should, I describe the elements of the program that were most useful to me as a writing instructor teaching through service-learning. By describing these elements, I hope to offer ideas for providing support to writing faculty who are teaching through service-learning. This support may include programs that are smaller in scale or even less formal than the fellows program in which I participated, since such an expansive program might not be realistic or even desired for all universities.

My goals in this article are twofold. First, I hope to show that the notion of threshold concepts provides a productive lens for thinking about how faculty work through the challenges of teaching writing through service-learning and learn the pedagogy's key theories. Second, drawing on what was most useful for me in the fellows program, I hope to show how particular types of support may best help faculty make sense of the challenges and learn the pedagogy's threshold concepts. Even those faculty members who are able to make sense of their service-learning experiences independently, may work through challenges and learn the pedagogy's important concepts sooner with the kinds of support I describe in this article. Specifically, I discuss three elements of the fellows program that were crucial for me: 1. Regular meetings with diverse faculty and program leaders, 2. Inclusion of community members' voices in the conversation, and 3. Assumption of future iterations of service-learning projects. In the conclusion, I discuss these elements more fully. This discussion may be useful to readers in a position to develop or participate in support experiences—including even programs that are less formal or smaller than the fellows program I describe—for instructors who are developing and teaching new service-learning writing curricula.

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS: A BRIEF BACKGROUND

Meyer and Land originally coined the term "threshold concept" and likened it to a "portal" that opens "a new and previously inaccessible

way of thinking about something" (1). Irreversible, transformative, and troublesome, a threshold concept is a shift in thinking one must experience when studying in a discipline. Writing studies offers many examples.

In *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies,* Adler-Kassner, Wardle and contributors offer 37 possible threshold concepts of the field. Many of these concepts greatly trouble students initially but ultimately prove irreversible and transformative. In one example, writing instructors often witness students grapple with attunement to rhetorical situation. Many students want to know the "right way" to write. Many writing teachers have faced sighs, groans, and eye rolls when they respond to such questions with some variation of, "well, it depends [on your audience, your purpose, etc.]." Despite the frustration, students must learn the threshold concept that their strategies for writing depend upon their rhetorical situation. Such a concept may feel alien to a student who has learned in other disciplines to search for one right answer. Though initially troublesome, once learned, attunement to rhetorical situations will likely be irreversible and transformative, as illustrated by experienced writers who instinctively wonder, "Who am I writing for? And why?" when they begin writing anything important.

Another threshold concept, broken down into several elements by Adler-Kassner and Wardle's contributors, is that writers always have more to learn about writing. Again, this concept can feel strange or even troublesome. Some students wish that their learning about writing could be finished; they may assume that one day, it will be. In the writing center that I direct, first-year students sometimes express surprise when they learn that even advanced graduate students visit regularly. In some cases, they are surprised because they have not learned the threshold concept that writers always have more to learn, even when they are advanced. This relates partly to the threshold concept of attunement to rhetorical situation: since there is no end to possible rhetorical situations, there is no end to learning about how to navigate new ones.

Like Adler-Kassner, Wardle and their contributors, scholars usually discuss threshold concepts as they relate to *student* learning, but some

scholars have considered what they can tell us about faculty learning. In the next section, I discuss how threshold concepts may provide a useful lens for understanding the process through which faculty learn service-learning pedagogy.

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS AND SERVICE-LEARNING PEDAGOGY

Through the lens of threshold concepts, Harrison, Clayton, and Tilley-Lubbs examine faculty development in service-learning. They consider how faculty learn new concepts through threshold experiences, or "reflective encounters with dissonance that give rise to deeper understanding of threshold concepts" (6). They suggest that reciprocity, critical reflection, and the difference between service-learning and volunteerism are key examples of the threshold concepts of service-learning pedagogy. The difference between service-learning and volunteerism offers a critical example of a threshold concept faculty must understand when teaching through service-learning. Before experiencing this key shift in thinking, a faculty member might tack some volunteer hours onto a course and call it service-learning. An instructor who understands that volunteerism and service-learning differ will ask how service experiences can help students learn the key concepts of a course, rather than simply rack up some service hours for work that may or may not relate to course concepts.

In a separate article, Tilley-Lubbs describes reciprocity as another threshold concept of service-learning pedagogy. Before learning this concept, she admits, she created a service-learning project that was based on a rather "simplistic view of reciprocity" (60). Specifically, her Spanish and education students visited Spanish-speaking immigrant women and their families in their homes and occasionally delivered donated goods. In this transaction, the students gained practice speaking Spanish and learning about new cultures, and the families received donations and assistance learning to navigate United States culture. Tilley-Lubbs reflects on critical moments during the course, including student criticism, and describes her realization that real reciprocity extends far beyond this kind of simple transaction. With admirable candor, Tilley-Lubbs admits that she had also "created a deficit notion regarding the community," a notion that made

impossible genuine reciprocity between students and community members (64).

Tilley-Lubbs reflects long after the original project (six years) and implies that she needed the time to distance herself from the work and learn from the challenges she experienced, particularly regarding reciprocity (63). I do not wish to suggest that we should either speed up or put an end date on the process of studying service-learning pedagogy. Reflection takes time, and as with all pedagogies, service-learning works best when shaped and improved over time by teachers who commit themselves to constant learning and growth. I also do not wish to criticize Tilley-Lubbs, whose candid admission of her limitations and missteps offers precisely what we need to further the conversation about community-based work, its motivations, and its outcomes. Indeed, her discussion of these limitations and missteps offers the kind of inquiry into failure that scholars like Cushman and Grabill, Rumsey and Nihiser, and Rousculp call for.

Still, we must ask: what support could help faculty members make sense of their experiences, including the inevitable challenges and disappointments, sooner? For me, elements of the faculty fellows experience helped me to make sense of challenges and shift my thinking in important ways. Later in the article, I argue that these elements—specifically, regular meetings with other faculty and community members and assumption of future iterations of projects—can help writing instructors push through challenges and learn service-learning pedagogy's threshold concepts. In the next section, I provide context for this argument by describing the fellows program and explaining how I used autoethnography to track my thinking throughout it.

THE FACULTY FELLOWS EXPERIENCE AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

I participated in the faculty fellows in service-learning program at the University of Alabama-Birmingham (UAB) during its inaugural year, fall 2013-spring 2014. The program was created to invigorate service-learning at the university and equip more faculty to do the work. UAB, an urban campus in the middle of downtown Birmingham, celebrates its connection to the city. For example, a current undergraduate recruitment campaign for the university uses

the tagline, "Let the city be your classroom." The fellows program began partly out of this enthusiasm for the city-university connection and partly served to formalize and draw attention to much of the community-based teaching and research already happening at UAB. As a university-wide opportunity, it also facilitated collaboration among faculty across the disciplines.

In the program's first year, 11 faculty members were selected to participate. Participants were to develop service-learning curricula for a new or existing course, either to be offered the second semester of the fellows program or during the following year. To support this work, fellows were awarded $1,500 that could be used toward expenses like supplies, transportation, research costs, or reimbursement for speakers or student assistants. The fellowship required participants to attend mandatory two-hour monthly meetings, complete reading and writing assignments, and meet one-on-one with the leaders to discuss their developing curriculum.

Assessment data, such as numbers of service-learning courses taught and numbers of students enrolled in service-learning courses, suggest the institutional success of the program. Elizabeth Vaughan, UAB's director of service-learning, shares that in the 2014-2015 academic year—when the first fellows were putting into practice what they had learned as the second group studied in the program—numbers of service-learning courses and students had risen dramatically from the previous year. Specifically, the university saw a 13% increase in the number of service-learning courses offered (from 141 courses in 2013-2014 to 160 in 2014-2015) and a 72% increase in service-learning enrollment (1,744 students enrolled in a service-learning course in 2013-2014 versus 2,995 students enrolled in 2014-2015). While these increases have likely come from a number of measures, the spikes following the beginning of the fellows program eclipse the growth from previous years: from 2012-2013 to 2013-2014, the numbers of service-learning courses and enrolled students grew only 9% and 25%, respectively.

When I began the fellows program, I suspected that administrators would collect such university-wide data to investigate growth of service-learning courses taught and students enrolled after the

fellowship program began. What I wanted to know was less data-driven, but still important: How would the fellows program shape my thinking about teaching writing through service-learning? I wanted evidence of how my thinking developed, partly so I could articulate that learning and those new concepts to others. At this point, I was not yet thinking in terms of threshold concepts. Rather, I simply wanted to trace my learning and thinking throughout the yearlong program, including the semester in which I taught the new curriculum.

I turned to autoethnography, as I believed the method would allow me to analyze both my experiences and my thoughts. Harrison, Clayton, and Tilley-Lubbs advocate autoethnography to "mak[e] visible to [faculty] the evolution of their own thinking and practice" (13). They suggest that autoethnography can allow the researcher to build a theory by analyzing experience and can thus "reveal the threshold nature of threshold concepts and inform theorizing about threshold experiences that teaching with service-learning may catalyze" (13). Tilley-Lubbs uses autoethnography to trace her learning of the threshold concept of reciprocity during the service-learning course that was not as genuinely reciprocal as she would have liked (61). Like Tilley-Lubbs, I used autoethnography to trace my experiences and moments that my perspectives changed, though the language of "threshold concepts" and "threshold experiences" came later for me.

Throughout the year, I collected an archive of reflections. I journaled after each meeting of the fellows program, as well as after each meeting with my community partner and my students during the service-learning unit I taught during the second semester of the program. To my archive, I also added the "homework" from the fellows program, including curriculum development worksheets and a final report on my overall experience. Finally, I included my application for the program as part of my archive of written reflection, as it includes evidence of my thinking about service-learning before the year began. I closely analyzed this archive of writing to identify how and when my thinking had shifted.

In the sections that follow, I share four shifts in thinking that I experienced during my year in the faculty fellows program. My

reflections show how these shifts in thinking were born out of the challenges and even failures that I experienced over the year while I was developing and teaching a new service-learning writing curriculum as I participated in the fellows program.

FOUR POSSIBLE THRESHOLD CONCEPTS OF SERVICE-LEARNING PEDAGOGY

Threshold Concept One: Student Learning at the Center

Before the fellows program, I had enjoyed limited successes with service-learning, such as students becoming more invested during client-based writing projects that provided "real" audiences and purposes. Still, when I began the fellows program, I wanted to step back and learn the pedagogy's best practices before diving in again in the ways Hoffstetter Duffy describes (404). While this goal is reasonable, my earliest reflections reveal that some of my hopes for the program were a bit naïve. In my first reflection, for example, I write: "I decided to get involved in this program…primarily because I want to finally know the 'correct' ways of doing service-learning." Clearly, there is no one right way to teach through service-learning, and my quotation marks around "correct" suggest I suspected as much. At the same time, service-learning projects do share an important characteristic: they differ greatly from mere service, as they place student learning at the center of the experience. In a sense, it is this difference from service that creates such diversity in service-*learning* curricula. With student learning at the center, projects differ greatly based on the learning outcomes of the course and discipline. To create academically rigorous service-learning experiences for my students, I needed to learn the threshold concept that service-learning differs from service precisely because student learning is central.

This shift in thinking occurred largely out of troubling moments during fellows meetings, when I was overwhelmed by what Deans refers to in "English Studies and Public Service" as the "dizzying range of courses and programs [that] march under the banner of service learning" (15). As I had come into the fellows program hoping to learn the "right way" of doing service-learning, the vast differences among the fellows' developing projects made me feel off-center. However, some crossover left me even more troubled, particularly

when thinking about my previous attempts at service-learning. Like many professional writing faculty, I am often drawn to client-based projects that provide students with experience creating documents like brochures and newsletters for the community. Such projects—of the writing *for* model that Deans identifies—may provide community organizations documents they may not have the time or expertise to develop themselves. However, in "We Don't Need Any More Brochures: Rethinking Deliverables in Service-Learning," Leon and Sura discuss the limits of this kind of work for the community. Learning about projects from other disciplines made me further question whether professional writing is really best poised to teach this kind of writing. From the other fellows, I learned that service-learning courses in public relations, marketing, and graphic design, do similar client-based projects focused on promoting nonprofit work to local publics. A faculty fellow from marketing, for example, spoke at length about her students' work creating full advertising campaigns, complete with brochures and posters, for local nonprofits.

While it's no surprise that crossover exists between particular disciplines, I was troubled at how closely matched the projects from professional writing, public relations, marketing, and graphic design were. From the community's side, two questions emerge: How much of this work is really needed and, assuming the need is limited, what discipline will likely create the best deliverables? From the university's side, we may reasonably ask, which disciplines are most appropriate for teaching this kind of work? In other words, where should students learn how to create promotional or informational materials like ad campaigns, brochures, and even websites? If the answer is that no one discipline "owns" this kind of work and that different disciplines can teach it effectively from different perspectives, how do we design projects that best support our discipline's specific learning goals? Finally, if there is useful crossover between disciplines like public relations and professional writing, how might we collaborate better? For me, the fellows program raised these kinds of valuable questions that I used to develop writing curricula that was ultimately more complex than the basic client-based projects I had done before.

Threshold Concept Two: Teacher as Co-Learner

Creating more complex writing curricula also required me to become comfortable learning alongside students. When Harrison, Clayton, and Tilley-Lubbs write that in service-learning, "faculty, in their roles as teachers, are learners and co-learners," they refer partly to the experience of learning about the pedagogy itself (12). Additionally, community-based teaching often requires that faculty learn alongside their students about the community and community partners. I was less prepared for this type of co-learning than I was for learning about the pedagogy itself, and I certainly had not considered co-learning a foundational element of service-learning pedagogy. This idea of learning with students—so key to service-learning yet so uncomfortable for many faculty members—offers a possible second threshold concept of service-learning pedagogy. My reflections make clear that this idea was both initially troublesome and later irreversible, two of the hallmarks of threshold concepts. In this section, I spend a bit more time on this transformation in thinking than on the other three threshold concepts, but not because it is more important than the others. Rather, this idea of learning alongside students deeply influenced my developing curriculum, and to show this, I will discuss that curriculum in some detail. I hope that this discussion will also help readers understand my discussion in the next two sections about the changes I ultimately made to the curriculum.

As I mentioned earlier, I developed a new service-learning project during the first semester of the yearlong fellows program and taught it during the second semester. The service-learning project was for Writing in Birmingham, a 200-level professional writing elective in the English major. The course uses the city as both subject and exigence for students' writing (meaning, students typically write *about* the city and *for* local audiences and purposes). In the two years before the fellows program, I taught Writing in Birmingham without service-learning and felt dissatisfied with what I saw as the students' (and my) lack of engagement with the city. During these semesters, I learned that the course typically includes a mix of education and English majors. Because of this mix, I wanted to develop a project that incorporated elements of teaching, tutoring, or mentoring, in addition to writing and research.

In the project I ultimately developed, students tutored at an inner-city elementary school for several weeks and designed an anthology of the children's writing that we printed for the school and nearby public library. The community actually instigated this project. The principal had contacted a public librarian about developing a special project focused on writing. Hoping that his school would benefit from the diverse resources available in Birmingham, the principal suggested that such a program could also involve the university. The librarian then contacted me, and I talked with her and the principal about the Writing in Birmingham course and its potential for service-learning. Before beginning the fellows program, during which I planned the project in zest, the librarian, principal, and I agreed very generally that Writing in Birmingham would include a service-learning project that would fulfill the principal's desire for a special event on writing.

My first few reflections make clear that when I began really planning the project, I felt extremely nervous about how little I knew about the city and the school as a relative newcomer to Birmingham. In a reflection after my first meeting with the principal, I wondered whether my ignorance about the city and school would hamstring my students' work. Despite the principal's enthusiasm, I felt so overwhelmed and underprepared that I left the meeting with serious doubts about whether I should partner with the school at all. In particular, I had never partnered with a K-12 school during a service-learning project, and I worried that I did not know enough about the school's needs, student population, or even day-to-day routines to plan a useful project. I wondered, with my ignorance about the area and the school, what could I really provide?

Two weeks after my meeting with the principal, I sat down for the monthly faculty fellows meeting and saw the following quote from David Cooper projected on the screen: "A good teacher is prepared to set his or her students upon the journey to knowledge, and then be willing to go along for the ride" (qtd. in Black and Henley). The theme for the day's meeting, as suggested by the quote, was the importance of learning alongside students. My reflection makes clear that this meeting provided precisely what I needed at the time. Specifically, the meeting pushed me to understand the idea of teacher as co-learner.

In my reflection, I wrote: "It is necessary for me to go along for the ride [with my students], as I couldn't pretend to be an expert about Birmingham if I wanted to."

My shift in thinking amounted to more than simply boosting my confidence or my spirits. I entered that fellows meeting thinking about what I needed to learn to "pull off" the project so that it wouldn't fail. I left thinking about what my students and I both could learn about the school and the community and how this learning could happen *together* in meaningful ways that fit the learning goals of the class itself. For a course titled "Writing in Birmingham" and with the stated goals of studying writing and research through exploration of the city, I realized that it made perfect sense to put the onus of learning about the school and city partly on the students. In more specific terms, the course provided the perfect context for community-based research. Making the students responsible for such research before we ever entered the school would not only help them do their work with the school but would orient them into thinking of the service experience as an opportunity to learn about the city in ways that could inform their writing. I just needed to become comfortable with the idea that I would learn *with* the students.

The shift in thinking also opened opportunities for a more academically rigorous experience that involved different kinds of writing. In reflecting, I realize that my early plans for the project were not really service-learning at all, as they did not place student learning in the center in the ways described in the previous section. The experience I envisioned at first was really a volunteer opportunity with some written reflections tacked on. Especially with Birmingham's notorious history of violence during the civil rights struggle, the course always provoked discussion about race and inequality, but in writing and discussion, students sometimes hinted that Birmingham's problems had been "solved" or were irrelevant to the present. I believed having students engage the community would complicate these discussions, as resources in the city school system in which we would work, contrast starkly with resources in the suburban schools with which many of the students would be more familiar. When I began planning the project, I assumed that students would have some kind of awakening by simply working in the school

and then reflecting after. But, as Herzberg argues in "Community Service and Critical Teaching," neither community service nor personal writing necessarily brings about such epiphanies (308-09).

When I began thinking about how we could learn *together*, I was better situated to find readings and plan discussions that would help my students and I both learn about the local school system and the area in which we would work. I was also able to position the project so that the students and I could see their work at the school as research itself: instead of just going there to volunteer some time, we could ask ourselves, what can we learn about our city during our time in this school? Finally, I was able to craft writing assignments with more sophisticated rhetorical situations. Rather than only reflect on the experience of working with the children—important as that reflection is—I also asked students to communicate to public audiences about what they learned and did. This writing was also more sophisticated than the client-based projects I had assigned in the past, when students composed promotional materials for nonprofit organizations.

In the end, the course included reading and discussion about the local school system, as well as several different types of writing before, during, and after the service. Specifically, the students performed the first two types of writing that Deans identifies: writing *about* and writing *for*. Students wrote about the school system in research writing, as well as in reflections on their time working at the school. They wrote and composed for the community in the pedagogical documents they created for the children and the anthology they designed for the children's writing. Finally, they wrote sort-of about and sort-of for the school in articles that they wrote for public audiences after the project ended. On the one hand, these documents were about the school, while on the other, they promoted it. Ideally, the students may have also performed the third kind of writing Deans identifies: writing *with* the community. This is one limitation of the project's first iteration, performed during my year in the fellows program. I discuss others, as well as my reflections and revisions to the project, in the next two sections. Despite these limitations, understanding the concept of learning with students allowed me to

develop a project that was far more academically rigorous from the beginning than it would have otherwise been.

Threshold Concept Three: The Connection between Reciprocity and Sustainability
As Tilley-Lubbs suggests, in beginning a service-learning agenda, some instructors may think of reciprocity as mutual benefits—we (the university) will get X (an experience for students, research participants) and they (the community) will get Y (a product, volunteers, resources) (60). In "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change," Cushman shows that real reciprocity involves more than this type of mutually beneficial transaction: "Reciprocity includes an open and conscious negotiation of the power structures reproduced during the give-and-take interactions of the people involved in both sides of the relationship" (16). Cushman also addresses sustainability, arguing in "Sustainable Service Learning Programs" for sustainable work and cautioning against the one-shot style of service-learning that is unfortunately common.

Reciprocity and sustainability are important in their own right, but they are also inextricably linked. Plenty of service-learning teachers argue that they want a sustainable, mutually beneficial relationship with community partners. But when a project is based on the kind of *reciprocal* relationship that Cushman describes, all stakeholders have a greater investment in sustaining it. Further, when a relationship is sustained over time, the partners have the opportunity to develop a more positive, reciprocal collaboration. All partners will make missteps, and some projects will turn out less mutually beneficial than others. But, sustained relationships allow for more negotiations and interactions of the type Cushman describes. Further, Remley argues that reciprocity can come in many forms (116). A sustained relationship allows for those different forms to emerge. This is a third possible threshold concept in service-learning pedagogy: when it comes to relationships, reciprocity and sustainability work in tandem.

Before the fellows program, sustainability and reciprocity were mainly service-learning buzzwords in my mind. I knew that I *should* want sustainable, reciprocal relationships with community partners, but I had a better sense of how to build them within program-based

engagement than in course-based service-learning. Further, I did not understand the real importance of either concept, partly because I had not considered the connection between them. Thinking about this connection—if this relationship works we'll be invested in sustaining it, and if we work together over time, the reciprocity will deepen—marked a major shift in my thinking.

In particular, thinking about reciprocity and sustainability in tandem changed the way I thought about my writing curriculum's measures of success. I became more comfortable with the idea of smaller-scale projects but more concerned with how to develop a relationship over time. In writing courses, service-learning projects can feel small. We do not have 200-student classes to send into the community, and rarely are we awarded funds like my biology colleague's $1 million National Science Foundation grant. Following a critical fellows meeting, I reflected: "My measure of success, or at least a major one, would be how many years in a row I get a group of students to the school to work with the children. I have this fantasy of a bunch of anthologies of student writing from the project on a language arts teacher's or library's shelf." My measure of success had clearly shifted from the project's scope to its sustainability. Community representatives at the meeting enabled this crucial shift (more about this in the conclusion).

While I was clearly thinking about sustainability in this reflection, I was simply assuming at this point that the project was reciprocal, as the community would receive clear services and deliverables in exchange for my students' learning experience. Later in the semester, I experienced the most troublesome moment of the year when I learned that the primary deliverable, the anthology I reflected on so excitedly here, disappointed the community partner. My reflection on this moment was titled "a new twist," and a new twist it was. The principal had emailed me following the final celebration—where the anthologies had been distributed—to say that he was disappointed that my students had not fully edited the children's writing. We had a clear breakdown in communication about the project's major deliverable, and we had a philosophical disagreement as well. Where I believed it was most important for the children to own their anthologies by having their "real" writing included, the principal thought it was most important that the anthology offer the most polished version of

his students' work. My reflection on this troublesome moment was all-out dejected. I felt embarrassed. I felt like a failure.

In conversations and writing during the fellows program, I reflected on this experience. I came to realize that what I believed to be a reciprocal relationship was one merely built on exchange—you provide this, and we will provide that. I had discussed the anthologies with the principal and teachers, but that discussion had focused solely on what my students could provide. "They are professional writing students with document design experience!" I had explained excitedly. The principal and teachers responded enthusiastically, but what option had I given them? I had not opened a conversation or asked for their perspective on the deliverable. Their concern with what we created, that the children's writing contained errors that reflected poorly on the school, was understandable. Given the school system's reputation in the city, as well as how that reputation relates to larger issues regarding race and class, the principal was reasonably concerned for how a larger public may see those errors outside of our project's context.

While I felt disappointed by the principal's reaction to the anthologies, our ability to reflect together and improve the project for the future helped me understand the connection between reciprocity and sustainability. The original project had not been fully reciprocal, but we were able to address the problems and develop something more reciprocal, because we had begun the project assuming that we would work together over time. Critical reflection was also central to this work. In the next section, I describe how critical reflection allowed us to retool the project in the moment and for future iterations, in part by more carefully considering the public rhetorical situation of the potential deliverables my students could create for and with the school.

Threshold Concept Four: Reflecting on Action and in Action
Critical reflection is central to everything I describe in the previous sections. Without it, service-learning faculty cannot work toward important goals like reciprocity and sustainability. We ask our students to reflect during service-learning projects, and most faculty members reflect, either formally or informally, all of the time. My

response to the principal's disappointment shows that by the end of the faculty fellows program, I had learned to use reflection to adjust in the moment and to inform future iterations of projects.

Reflection is an activity. At first glance, then, it may not seem to constitute a shift in thinking like the concepts I describe in previous sections. However, I argue that understanding the *role* of reflection in service-learning pedagogy does constitute a threshold concept. Specifically, faculty must learn to see reflection in the ways described by Taggart and Hessler, who argue that community-based teaching requires faculty to reflect in the moment and retool on the spot and for future iterations of projects. We often envision reflection as quiet, still moments back in the office, but critical reflection involves noise and movement and very often occurs on the ground with our community partners. Reflection and action are inseparable, as service-learning faculty must both reflect on their in-the-moment actions and make changes—again, sometimes in the moment— based on those reflections. Such reflection on action and in action builds knowledge and works toward reciprocal, sustainable, and collaborative relationships.

The principal's disappointment in the anthology was the most troublesome moment I had experienced during years of community-based work. When I spoke with him and the librarian, I learned that their main concern had to do with the public nature of the anthology. We had initially agreed to keep copies at the school and public libraries, a decision that excited the community partners when they assumed the books would be thoroughly edited. I reflected on the principal's concern—what will people think when they see children's writing, errors and all, out of context?—and realized that I had blithely assumed that readers would understand that the writing simply reflected the limits of our small project. I also assumed that readers would focus on the creativity of the students' writing and skim over the errors. In truth, I had not fully analyzed the public audience or context, nor had I invited my students to do so. When I reflected critically, I realized that the principal was right. Given the Birmingham city school system's reputation, public readers were likely to take the children's errors as more evidence of the school's failures.

However, I did not agree with the principal's solution to edit the children's writing. Critical reflection helped me to understand why—that I wanted the anthology to reflect the children's own efforts and abilities—and express it clearly to the principal. We agreed to remove the anthologies from the library shelves but keep them in the school. We also agreed that if we created public writing next year, we would make sure that it represented the school carefully. When we did repeat the project the following spring, my students created a school newsletter featuring pictures, interviews with teachers, and articles about events in the school and library. The newsletter also included short writings from the children about their favorite things in the school. We focused on this piece throughout the program, so the children were able to produce more polished prose. As the final newsletter included pieces from the children and pieces written by my students with information from the teachers and staff, it constituted the writing *with* model that Deans advocates. Additionally, my students and I talked throughout the project about the newsletter's public audience, context, and purpose. Our discussions were more nuanced, interesting, and appropriate to the course's learning goals than conversations in the previous semester, when my students and I had only focused on creating well-designed anthology.

The principal and teachers were thrilled with the newsletter. Our negotiation helped us to develop our relationship, address the project's disappointments in the moment, and improve its future iterations. Understanding the role of reflection allowed for these negotiations toward a more reciprocal project. Through failure, I came to understand the threshold concept that service-learning requires reflecting in the moment and then using those critical reflections toward action.

SUPPORTING FACULTY LEARNING OF SERVICE-LEARNING THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

Three elements of the faculty fellows program helped me to shift my thinking in the ways described in the previous sections: 1. Regular meetings with diverse faculty and program leaders, 2. Inclusion of community members' voices in the conversation, and 3. Assumption of future iterations of service-learning projects. I conclude the article

by describing how these three elements helped me learn from the challenges and failures I faced during the year.

Regular Meetings with Diverse Faculty and Program Leaders
For faculty, opportunities for thinking deeply and talking about teaching with others can feel limited and sporadic. Faculty members' time is stretched thin among research, service, teaching, and, for some, administration. Despite good intentions, courses can get put together more hastily than we would like. Further, our time for talking and reflecting after courses end can be limited, as that time gets taken up by grading papers and getting the next semester's courses ready. In service-learning, lack of time for careful planning and reflection can hamstring efforts to create meaningful, reciprocal experiences for students and community members.

Quite simply, the fellows program provided a regular time and space to plan carefully and reflect critically on my teaching over the course of the year. In my final report, I wrote:

> I greatly valued the chance to talk about teaching with a diverse group of colleagues, an experience that is, surprisingly, greatly lacking in the day-to-day life of a university faculty member…. Having established times—times that were required, so I couldn't flake out when a conference proposal or pile of grading got in the way—set aside just to discuss teaching was in itself extremely valuable.

For me, having built-in time to think about my teaching with the support of colleagues was essential. This support allowed me to make sense of the troubling moments of service-learning, rather than take the disappointments as evidence that I should just keep my teaching on campus.

Importantly, this support was also regular and spaced out. The faculty fellows met monthly over the course of the academic year. In addition, we met once one-on-one with program leaders and enjoyed a final celebration in the spring. Our meetings were meaningful because they happened regularly, so that I thought often about my

service-learning teaching. And finally, the meetings were with people who I would not have normally met, like faculty from other fields and service-learning leaders from other universities.

My shift to placing student learning at the center provides one example of the importance of *regular* meetings with diverse faculty. Before the fellows program, I had not interacted enough with faculty in marketing and graphic design to learn that many of their common service-learning projects look like typical client-based projects in professional writing. Learning this during the fellows meetings was important in itself, but had I only interacted with these faculty once and seen how their curricula resembled mine, I might have walked away with only concern about whether such client-based work was appropriate for my discipline.

Meeting regularly with faculty from other disciplines like marketing and graphic design allowed my thinking to develop beyond this initial concern. More specifically, talking regularly with these faculty, helped me shift to an understanding that service-learning projects must develop from specific learning goals. Unlike volunteerism or community service, service-learning asks how we can best teach students what we want them to learn through partnerships with our communities. If projects in writing courses look similar to those in other disciplines, such as marketing, that's likely the byproduct of disciplinary crossover that may be useful if we collaborate wisely and think critically about the specific learning goals of our writing courses. Had I not met faculty from other disciplines, I might not have learned about the crossover between common service-learning projects in professional writing and fields like marketing. Had I not met faculty *regularly*, I might have learned about this crossover but felt only worry and disappointment that I had perhaps been teaching projects more appropriate for other disciplines. Finally, meeting regularly with diverse faculty allowed me to develop deeper relationships that could foster collaboration thus taking advantage of disciplinary crossover. This first characteristic may be most important for faculty service-learning support programs: diverse faculty need to meet regularly over time to allow thinking to deepen and relationships to grow.

Inclusion of Community Members' Voices

Faculty may lack opportunities to talk with community members about their teaching; in their few existing opportunities, they may interact with community members with whom they are already collaborating. In these situations, feelings may prevent community members from providing candid perspectives or keep faculty from learning from the community members' viewpoints. Some of my deepest learning came from interacting with community members in the fellows program, as they allowed me to hear "real" perspectives from the community— real in the sense that their views or my reactions to them were not influenced by our relationship. Representatives from two community organizations led one of our most important meetings, in which I had the epiphany about the relationship between reciprocity and sustainability.

During this meeting, the two community representatives shared their perspectives on partnerships between the university and community organizations like those that they led. They emphasized the importance of relationships instead of outcomes and even suggested that focused work performed repeatedly may yield greater benefits than one-time large-scale projects, as they allow for relationships to develop. One of the speakers even commented that repetition in itself can be useful and should not be feared: "It's not about going to do something different every semester," she remarked. She cautioned that doing something different can actually dilute the effect of service-learning, as partners become focused on developing a new *project* instead of developing the *relationship*, and not allowing enough time to reflect and improve upon projects.

Hearing from the community representatives helped me begin focusing on developing relationships over time instead focusing only on the project itself. Additionally, these perspectives helped me to better understand the relationship between reciprocity and sustainability. In a reflection following this meeting, I wrote:

> One thing that came out of today's meeting, for me, was the idea that a mutually beneficial relationship contributes to sustainability. If a project proves mutually beneficial to both the community and university partner, it stands a better chance of being sustainable

than a project with little clear benefit for one or both partners. Now that I see it in writing, that seems incredibly obvious (if it's good, we'll keep doing it!) and yet, much of the scholarship of service-learning, including my own, discusses mutual benefits and sustainability as if those are distinct characteristics.

As my reflection suggests, I had not considered how reciprocity (though I use "mutually beneficial" in this segment) and sustainability may be connected, even in my previous research about community-based project that formed a major part of my dissertation.

Had I not been participating in the faculty fellows program, I may have only been interacting with the school principal and librarians when I experienced the greatest failure of the year—the disappointing anthology that I discuss in the previous sections. While interacting with the principal and librarians was clearly important, learning from other community members helped me make sense of this failure, particularly by thinking deeply about building relationships over time. I had learned from these community members that these relationships mattered—more, even, than service-learning deliverables like the anthology my students produced. In faculty support experiences, the inclusion of community members' perspectives may enable deep shifts in thinking that come out of the challenges they experience.

Assumption of Future Iterations of Service-Learning Projects
Throughout the year, the faculty fellows program included a constant message: the fellows' developing service-learning curriculum is not a one-time project but the beginning of a larger effort that may involve many future iterations. The fellows program emphasized ongoing reflection on and revision to service-learning curricula, which made the challenges and failures along the way easier to bear by keeping the focus always on learning and developing relationships, not pulling off the perfect project. Ultimately, this assumption enabled me to regroup and grow after learning that the anthology had disappointed the community partner.

In more practical terms, conversations in fellows meetings revolved often around one major question: What will you do next time? In this way, the faculty fellows experience enabled critical reflection

and helped me to understand its importance to service-learning by pushing me to always question what I would do next, whether in the next step of the service-learning project, the next iteration of it, or the next project I planned. Moreover, it matters that this question occurred in the moment of my service-learning project and directly related to action. Rather than wait for the semester to end to reflect or reflect without *doing* anything, the fellows program pushed me to reflect on my project while it was happening and think about how that reflection could inform action. Embracing this mindset— of always questioning how to improve projects, in the moment and in the future—allowed me to handle productively the community partner's disappointment and helped me see how reflection forms a central part of service-learning.

Assuming future iterations of projects is central to all of the four threshold concepts I describe in the article: the importance of placing student learning at the center and learning alongside students, the connection between reciprocity and sustainability, and the necessity of reflecting on action and in action. By starting with the idea that projects will develop over time, faculty have the freedom to learn alongside their students and understand the importance of reflecting and retooling regularly. Learning alongside students and reflecting regularly, push faculty to build the type of reciprocal, sustainable projects that place student learning at the center. For writing faculty developing and teaching new service-learning curricula, support should always be grounded in this idea that the beginning of a project is only that: a beginning.

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