The (W)right thing?: Service-learning **IN** the composition classroom

Adam Webb

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Service-learning has been a trend in educational theories and practices since the early twentieth century and is closely associated with the Progressive Era (Gregory R. Zieren & Peter H. Stoddard, 2004, p. 30-31). As an educational methodology, service-learning has been influenced by social critics, democratic ideology, and "civic activism" in North America (p. 31-35). Zieren & Stoddard (2004) claim that service-learning has roots in "the German dual system of classroom instruction alongside work in the field in the student's occupation (from Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999)" and "in 1901 [when] the first community college, then called a junior college, opened its doors in Joliet, Illinois (from the American Association of Community Colleges, 2001)" (p. 31). Service-learning in North American education is also indebted to the educational philosophies of John Dewey, who "insisted that higher education must meet public needs and that the culture must adapt to 'the conditions of modern life, of daily life, of political and industrial life' (from Veysey, 1965, p. 115)" (p. 31). The rich history of service-learning in North American culture has roots in humanist philosophy as well.

While much of the research and literature on service-learning focuses on its educational values and pedagogical practices (Sigmon, 1979; Adler-Kassner, Crooks, & Watters, 1997; Dorman & Dorman, 1997; Gere & Sinor, 1997; Ball & Goodburn, 2000; Deans, 2000; Tai-Seale, 2001; Dubinsky, 2001; Herzberg, 2001; Cushman, 2002; Sedlak, Doheny, Panthofer, & Anaya, 2003; Regan & Zuern, 2004; Hutchinson, 2005; Mathieu, 2005; Miklochak, 2006; Posey & Quinn, 2009; Brownell & Swaner, 2009), others have viewed service-learning as a way to empower students by having them construct a civic identity, as well as address the moral and ethical aspects of connecting education and community (Weigert, 1999; Rosenberger, 2000; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Dicklitch, 2005; Milofsky & Flack, Jr., 2005), while others have

connected service-learning to social equality, equity, and justice (Crews, 1999; Merrill, 1999; Martin, Jr. & Wheeler, 2000; Munter, Tinajero, Peregrion, & Reyes III, 2009), as well as service-learning's connections to volunteerism and religion (Kraft, 1996; Cavanagh, 1999; Youniss, 1999; Gunst Heffner & DeVries Beversluis, 2002), and finally others have focused on service-learning and teacher preparation (Wade, 1997; Guadarrama, 2000; Anderson, Daikos, Granados-Greenberg, & Rutherford, 2009).

What is service-learning?

What is service-learning? Service-learning is a method that connects teaching and learning goals with community service, usually in the form of volunteering. Service-learning helps students participate within local communities—promoting civic engagement and responsibility—thus building important connections and a greater understanding of those communities' diverse needs. The educational component of service-learning comes in the form of having students reflect on their experiences. Service-learning's connection to freshmen composition is relatively recent, starting in the mid-nineteen-eighties. For the purposes of this issue investigation, I will be focusing on service-learning's use in the teaching of composition.

Beginnings: Service-learning and (in) the composition classroom

Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, & Ann Watters (1997) use "Kolb's learning cycle" model for "experimental learning" to describe an approach to comprehending how service-learning might work (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, & Watters, p. 9-10).
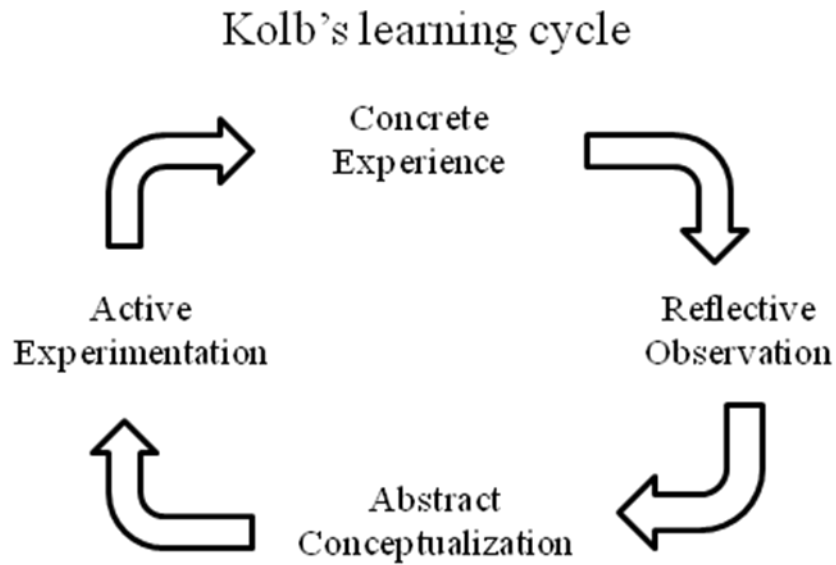
Kolb's learning cycle

Figure 1. Adler-Kassner, Crooks, & Watters, 1997, p. 10

However, Adler-Kassner et al. also point out that the model is somewhat limited in its movement of learning, "as a one-directional path with a set itinerary" with no recursiveness or modes of variance (p. 9). Adler-Kassner et al. state, "More importantly, perhaps it fails to account clearly for ideological conditioning of experience that is always already in place, and which arguably shapes the experience itself" (p. 9). They claim that "Rhetoric offers a great deal to theorizing service-learning and Composition, or the theory/practice connection more generally, because it has always viewed communication as a kind of technology, a form of action aimed at producing effects" (p. 9). How might the "theorizing" of service-learning and composition bring the theory/practice together in/outside of classroom?

A possible first step could be to list the important principles and factors that go into incorporating service-learning into the classroom. Robert Sigmon (1979) lists three principles for service-learning:

1. "Those being served control the service(s) provided

2. Those being served become better able to serve and be served by their own actions

3. Those who serve also are learners and have significant control over what is expected to

    be learned" (Sigmon, p. 10).

While Sigmon establishes the foundational principles for using service-learning in the

classroom, Bruce Herzberg (2000) claims that service-learning should be used within the writing

classroom because:

1. "Current issues" are more appealing to students

2. Issues and problems within the public community "helps students understand audience

    and genre constraints"

3. Establishes a "social consciousness" that might "to social action"

4. Encourages "civic leadership" (Herzberg, pp. 467-68)

Also building on Sigmon's three main principles, James M. Dubinsky (2001) lists three

important factors in service-learning:

1. "*Learning* (with clearly defined goals)

2. *Serving* (one's community)

3. *Reflecting* (on the service aspect)" (Dubinsky, p. 3)

Sigmon, Herzberg, and Dubinsky provide theoretical and pedagogical realms of consideration

when incorporating service-learning into the classroom.

Service-learning vs. community service

Linda Adler-Kassner (2000) claims that service-learning is not the same as community

service (Adler-Kassner, p. 28). Adler-Kassner states service-learning "involves linking the

subject of a class with work in a nonprofit community organization and reflecting on that

experience in some structured way (i.e. in journals or essays)" (p. 28). She poses the question of

how does encouraging students to become "good citizens" equate with becoming better writers (p. 28).

In order to understand how service-learning is being implemented in the composition classroom, so that students not only focus on the service aspect but the writing as well, Adler-Kassner suggests Thomas Deans' three approaches:

1. "Writing *for* community" – Students create documents specifically based on that community's needs

2. "Writing *about* community" – Students reflect on their experiences working within a certain community

3. "Writing *with* community" – Students work more collaboratively together with individuals in a certain community in order to meet a need (p. 28)

When using any one of these approaches, or "creating a mix" of them, the instructor must be careful when developing the assignments and defining the type service to be provided within a local community (p. 28). She proposes three approaches:

1. The "'discourse community' model" – This is a "skills focused approach to teaching composition" and fits under the writing *for* community

2. The "'contact zone' model" – The emphasis here is on the "'safe spaces' where different discourses/experiences can be confronted." This approach aligns with writing *with* community

3. The "classroom as 'dialogic'" – Teachers "help the students enter into a dialogue with conventions of various discourses, both inside and outside of the academy." Writing *with* the community can be used in this approach (pp. 28-29)

Examples of "mixing" these models and approaches can be seen in the most current literature, such as Isabel Baca & Arturo Muro's (2009) "The hook-up: College writers and non-profits building relationships," where writing *for* and writing *with* the community is combined (*Service-learning in the composition classroom*, in publication). And in Adam Webb's (2009) "Something to write about: Service-learning as transitional rhetoric in composition," where writing *about* and writing *with* the community is combined (*Service-learning in the composition classroom*, in publication).

<p align="center">**Current research on service learning in the teaching of writing**</p>

In this section, I plan to examine how service-learning is currently being viewed and addressed within the composition classroom (as well as within the academic institution) as a form of pedagogy (the teaching of writing) and the theory that fosters or encourages "rhetoric within the communities.[1]"

Creating sustainable service-learning programs

In "Sustainable service-learning programs," Ellen Cushman (2002) takes a close look at some of the factors that contribute to lasting programs. Cushman examines these four elements: The professor, "real research," methodology, and curriculum in service-learning programs. She states:

> "Service learning programs that have sustained themselves have incorporated reciprocity and risk taking that can best be achieved when the researcher views the site as a place for teaching, research, and service—as a place for collaborative inquiry—with the students and community partners." (Cushman, p. 43)

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[1] By "rhetoric within the communities" I am implying disciplines within the academic institution and individuals, agencies, and organizations within the public.

An important aspect in creating a viable service-learning program is the professors' level of dedication and involvement. The professor's role(s) within a service-learning program must be that of "researcher and teacher" (p. 43). The professor must set clear goals and objectives, structure activities and assignments that reflect what the students are going to be doing within the community, and work directly with that community's leaders.

The next aspect of service-learning programs Cushman examines is that of "real research" (p. 44). By real research, Cushman gives the example of the "end-of-semester-project" where students create a reflective document based their experiences volunteering or closely working with individuals within the community (p. 44). She cites Dorman & Dorman's approach to teaching students what real research is, who compare real research like "wandering in the dark" trying to find clues to why they are doing what they are doing (p. 45). Cushman suggests that is a misrepresentation of scholarly research methods because scholars usually follow a structure that contains research questions and an "ethical" plan when answering their questions (p. 46).

Developing a methodology can offer "the professors and students with a systematic means for inquiry" (p. 46). Cushman gives the example of using journals to counter the end-of-semester-approach. However, she questions how students might actually view and use journals, possibly misinterpreting "the rhetorical and methodological purposes of journals, reducing the journals to another kind of academic exercise" to have as proof that they are actually engaging in the project (p. 46). The need for a standard methodology, as Cushman claims, is important for establishing the research done in service-learning projects as a credible way in which to gather and interpret data.

According to Cushman, one of the main problems with end-of-the-semester service-learning projects is "task integration" (p. 48), stating these as the main "problems":

1. "Lack of connection among tasks"

2. "Unreasonably demanding tasks"

3. "Appropriateness of tasks"

4. "Empty tasks" (pp. 48-49)

Cushman offers the Richmond Community Literacy Project as an explemar for a service-learning project/course. In her description of this project/course, Cushman explains the complexity of designing and arranging the situation within the local community. The model and approach to service-learning that Cushman presents mixes writing *about* and writing *with* the community. Cushman concludes with stressing the role of the professor in establishing "trust, commitment, and consistency" with the community they are seeking to help (p. 58).

Service-learning at St. Cloud State University (SCSU) in Minnesota

Maria Mikolchak (2006) has indentified her students' struggle to connect the topics they were writing to their own lives. Mikolchak was teaching English 191, a composition course, at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota when she decided to incorporate service-learning into her classroom to motivate her students. Mikolchak's service-learning course was comprised of three elements: "teaching an argument, interpreting images, and analyzing violence in society" (Mikolchak, p. 94). She divided her course into three sections: The first section dealt with involved the teaching of the "Toulmin model of argument," the second section dealt with the theory of using visuals as arguments, and section three dealt with teaching students how to research (the "general topic of Violence Toward Women") (p. 94). In designing her assignment for the students, Mikolchak was able to find an organization that dealt with the topic of her

course called Annemarie's Shelter for battered women. She also sought out assistance from the service-learning coordinator from SCSU. As part of the requirements of the course, Mikolchak had individuals from the women's shelter visit her class to explain how the students would be participating in building a "transitional house" (p. 95).

Mikolchak had her students write a research essay reflecting on their experiences while volunteering that culminated in a presentation, where they got to share their experiences. Reflection played an important part in the students' writing. Mikolchak's own reflection over the service-learning project stressed the "positive" influence it had on the students (p. 96). She also found that students keeping journals promoted "a safe place for reactions" (p. 96). As for the final research project (the research paper/essay), Mikolchak claimed that "better than average quality, which I [she] think[s] to a great degree reflects the genuine interest the students had in their research" (p. 98). She also stated that the students used various types of sources in their papers, such as interviews, and that they used their "experiences of service, lectures, and videos," creating a connection, and intertextuality, between the information within the diverse range of sources (p. 98). The students were not graded on the amount of time they volunteered at the women's shelter, but on how well they had learned from the service-learning experience and the connections they made to the course readings.

Mikolchak concluded with a positive perspective of incorporating a service-learning project/assignment in the composition classroom. However, she does mention that using service-learning in such as way does take dedication and motivation from the teacher as well as from the students. Mikolchak's approach involved writing *about* and writing *with* the community, once again showing the "mixing" of models that Adler-Kassner described early.

Service-learning in composition and the humanities

Sandra Mizumoto Posey & Dennis Quinn (2009) describe the incorporation of service-learning projects within the Interdisciplinary General Education (IGE) track at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (CSPU). This one of two tracks that freshmen can choose that contains "eight courses spanning two and a half years in which subject matter is viewed as inextricably intertwined: history, literature, composition, and other disciplinary perspectives are all lenses through which students learn to articulate their own voice" (Posey & Quinn, p. 1-2). Posey & Quinn cite from Dorman & Dorman's suggestion to incorporate "discussion-based pedagogy and strategies such as service-learning" in order to break away from more traditional methods of teaching (p. 2).

CSPU structured class time and activities around the service-learning projects. The service-learning projects were structured around the courses' readings as well as the writing assignments, which includes conducting "fieldwork," reflection, and the "synthesizing of course readings in a "creative way" (p. 8). One of the service-learning projects involved the students visiting a local cemetery and cleaning up the grounds (i.e. trash, and overgrown grass, etc.) (p. 8). The courses that the students take in conjunction with the service-learning projects, for instance the cleaning of the cemetery, tied into a religious theme that involved a "religious studies scholar" (p. 9). This connection contributes to the students' overall learning experiences within the academy's curriculum.

Posey & Quinn also discovered during the service-learning project that vandals and trespassers had been visiting the cemetery because it was known for its "ghost-lore." (p. 9). However, the religious studies scholar saw this as a "healthy expression of popular religion connecting back to the ancient world" (p. 9). Posey & Quinn's conclusions were that the

incorporation of service-learning projects into their curriculum provided an active and positive experience for the students. They did not fully describe the type of writing that the students engaged in, but the integration of tasks and assignments they did describe seemed to fit within the all three models described by Alder-Kassner: writing, *for*, *about*, and *with* the community.

Other approaches to using service-learning in the composition/writing classroom

In this section I will briefly cover some of the ways in which service-learning assignments/projects are being incorporated into the composition classroom. All of the examples given are teacher-initiated uses of service-learning assignment/projects. In *Service-learning in the composition classroom* edited by Susan Garza (currently in publication from Fountainhead X Press, 2009), teachers and instructors explore the various aspects of service-learning within their composition classrooms as well as within the academic institution itself.

The two chapters I mentioned earlier, by Isabel Baca and Arturo Muro and Adam Webb, address the theoretical and pedagogical aspects of incorporating service-learning in the classroom, as well as developing assignments and building a classroom structure that fosters collaboration with the local non-profit organizations. Baca & Muro's and Webb's chapters focus on collaboration between students and local non-profit organizations within the community. While Baca & Muro's chapter focuses on working with local non-profits in producing writing specifically for their organizations, Webb's chapter concentrates on having students volunteer at local non-profit organizations, keeping journals, and writing reflections during the course of the semester on their experiences. While this book focuses on teachers developing their own approaches of using service-learning in the composition classroom, there are many universities that have developed service-learning programs.

Service-learning programs within the university, online journals, and the "clearinghouse"

Many universities have implemented service-learning programs within their curriculum and first-year programs. Examples of these universities include: [The University of Delaware's Service-learning program](#), [Mississippi State University's Day One Leadership](#), [Syracuse University's Service-learning program](#), and the [University of Texas at El Paso's Service-learning and civic engagement program](#). While these are a few of the universities around the country that have implemented service-learning programs, there are many more.

Some online journals concentrate heavily on service-learning, such as [Reflections: A journal of writing, service-learning, and community literacy](#) and [Community Literacy Journal](#). A comprehensive organization that acts a giant repository of information and ideas is the [Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse](#).

Questions about service-learning in composition

While there is a growing amount of literature dealing with service-learning and the teaching of composition, the focus of the articles seem to concentrate on the service-learning aspect more than the how well it connects to (or does not connect to) the teaching of writing. In this section, I would like to address some of the questions dealing with service-learning in composition that I have been building over the last four years. While some of these questions have been addressed within the literature of service-learning in composition, I still feel as if they are questions worth asking and exploring in greater detail.

- Is service-learning replacing more traditional approaches of writing instruction? How?
- How are service-learning writing assignments or projects different from more traditional writing assignments or projects?
- How do service-learning assignments and projects change the pedagogy in the classroom?
- How do service-learning writing assignments and projects make students better writers?
- What kinds of writing do students do in a service-learning composition classroom?

- What kinds of writing activities and assignments and projects do students engage in a service-learning composition classroom?
- Why should an instructor incorporate service-learning into their composition classroom?
- What will students get out of engaging in service-learning projects in the composition classroom?
- How can composition instructors incorporate service-learning into their classrooms and still meet the university's curriculum outcomes, goals, and objectives?
- What kinds of rhetoric do students engage in during a service-learning project?
- How can a university/college create a "sustainable" service-learning program?
- What types of training should composition instructors receive to teach service-learning projects in their classrooms?
- How should composition instructors select or choose the local communities (i.e. non-profit organizations) to work with?
- What should be the outcome of a service-learning composition classroom?
- How does service-learning in the composition classroom affect/effect ESL students and their writing?
- Should students work collaboratively when engaging in a service-learning composition classroom?
- How should technology be incorporated in a service-learning composition classroom?
- What theories should students be introduced to in a service-learning composition classroom?
- What types of peer review do students engage in a service-learning composition classroom?
- What types of drafting do students do in a service-learning composition classroom?
- Invention in the service-learning composition classroom.
- Rhetoric and the service-learning composition classroom.
- Why should students engage in service-learning projects in the composition classroom?
- What can motivate students to engage in service-learning projects in the composition classroom?
- What should local communities get out of service-learning projects?
- What is the role of the university/college in service-learning projects?
- Should universities/colleges be involved in service-learning projects? How? Why? Why not?
- Should students produce some form of writing for the instructor in the service-learning composition classroom?
- What is the purpose is reflective writing in the service-learning composition classroom?
- How should instructors stay in touch with students when they are engaging in service-learning projects?
- What is the role of the student in a service-learning composition classroom?
- Should students be objective in their writing in a service-learning composition classroom? Subjective? Why? Why not? Can the two be fused? How? Why? Why not?
- How is service-learning a form of activism?
- How much writing should students do in a service-learning composition classroom?

- What kinds of writing should students do in a service-learning composition classroom?
- What types of evaluation or grading rubrics should be used to evaluate or grade students' writing in the service-learning composition classroom?
- How effective is service-learning in first-year writing programs?
- By engaging in a service-learning project in the composition classroom, do students become better writers? How?

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