

# Chapter 3. Introductory Writing as the Gateway to Stronger Communities, College and Career Success

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This chapter speaks to the powerful role writing can play in retaining students and maximizing their capacity to bridge significant gaps in pre-college preparation while laying the foundation for their future civic and professional participation. I will also raise issues for programs to consider when making the decision to integrate experiential learning (or *ExL*) into first-year composition classes. Finally, I end with a call to action to consider community-based writing as a vital outcome in first-year composition.

Zlotkowski in “Linking Service-Learning and the Academy: A New Voice at the Table?” argues that unless service-learning advocates become far more comfortable seeing enhanced learning as the horse pulling the cart of moral and civic values, and not vice versa, service learning will continue to remain less visible and less important to the higher education community as a whole than is good for its own survival. I am arguing for a shift in that perspective. Today’s “reoccurring doomsday headlines citing poor graduation rates and decreasing literacy among [high school and college] students” beg for a different metaphor. The problem with the horse and buggy metaphor is that it privileges academic discourse over moral and civic values. If we consider that many of our students, in particular the first-generation ones that I have sought to use service-learning approaches to teach writing to, the success of the methodology lies in the very fact that these students identify more closely with the civic and moral aspects of their lives; the academic zone is often completely new territory. The truth: we haven’t been very successful pulling them along anywhere; moral and civic values aren’t just along for the ride. We must engage students at the intersection of their authentic interests and values. Moral and civic values are not mere accompaniments to learning but rather the gateway to the social and economic networks that often elude our first-generation populations. *ExL* can be the means by which students acquire the cultural capital necessary to navigate their journey through the academic world as they make relevant connections to external communities. Writing, then, becomes the catalyst, the raw power that multiplies and intensifies students’ abilities to make connections to their extant belief system and to reflect in meaningful ways. It is no longer enough to orient students to academic prose in first-year writing when we so clearly have the power to transform them by giving them the access to a vision for the rest of their lives. . . a vision that begins, not ends, with

exploring the moral and civic obligations they already readily identify with.

Case in point: Esperanza Dillon. Esperanza was an above-average, non-traditional student who landed in my comp course ten years ago. Around week seven I decided to recap the research process and prepared to frame the final “big” research paper for the course. The more I talked, the more I could not ignore that sinking feeling that accompanies slow recognition. I had lost these folks. I cut the lecture and opted instead to pull up a chair in the center of the circle. “Ok, so tell me, what’s on your mind? What are you thinking?”

Esperanza broke the silence, her voice shaky at first but getting stronger as she proceeded: “Dr. B, I don’t want to speak for anyone else in this class. I think you’re really a good teacher and I know you’re telling us the things we need to know, but I’m overwhelmed. I’m a single parent and I graduate in December. I don’t have a job and from the looks of this research you want us to do, I’ll never find one ‘cuz I’ll be stuck in the library.” I asked Esperanza and the others to think about this for a moment and then write down any ideas they had about ways to make this research assignment applicable to Esperanza’s job search. Blank stares. Blank pages. “I’m sorry,” she piped up again. Her voice broke, tears followed. “I’m just afraid I’m running out of time—out of options.”

I knew I could help Esperanza navigate this assignment and discover some of the things she needed to know about herself and the workplace; however, I wasn’t clear about how to do it in a way that would be meaningful to everyone else in the room—many of them two or three years away from graduation and lacking the urgency surrounding her specific circumstances. I decided in that moment that as long as students were engaged in genuine inquiry, there was no way this work—yet to be defined—could fail. Esperanza’s inquiry was a job search, so my next question and her response triggered a paradigm shift in my approach to training others to teach freshman composition: “Esperanza, if you could wave a wand and have any job in the world today, what would it be?” To which she replied, “Oh, that’s easy. I want to work at the Wrightsville Literacy Center—a paying position. I volunteer there now, but even that’s gonna come to an end soon because we lost our funding.” To which I replied, “Now we’re getting somewhere! Your project, simply defined, is to plan a research project that investigates funding opportunities and benchmarks Wrightsville against other literacy centers—regionally and nationally. The deliverable: we write a grant. Best case: grant gets funded, you get your wish. Worst case: you learn new skills and find a job as a grant writer.” And to the class: “Everyone, follow Esperanza’s lead and write for fifteen minutes about a campus or community group you’re either connected to or have some interest in. Brainstorm. What do you think is researchable about this organization and make guesses about possible writing projects that could be helpful to their mission or goals?” There was one other event that made Esperanza’s plea hit a new nerve and made me commit to teaching community-based writing in composition classes from that day forward: just a few weeks prior our class sat in silence as we watched, together, the second plane crash into the Twin

Towers. The gravity of 9/11 coupled with the urgency of Esperanza's job search brought several issues into sharp relief. I started thinking about how our students measure their success, how our culture measures the success of our students, and finally, what could be accomplished in the writing classroom to reconcile all of this with what the field of composition studies has defined as desirable outcomes. What I heard in class that day was an expressed disconnect between what students were expected to learn and what students were expected to be able to *do* with what they learn.

Pierre Bourdieu in 1986 raised the question of cultural capital and its application to discussions of aptitude and academic success. Historically disadvantaged youth in today's academic settings exhibit the same gap in measures tracking their success as did the students identified by Bourdieu nearly thirty years ago. At that time, Bourdieu criticized human capital theorists for taking into account only the economic investments made into educational activity. The prevailing attitude then was to focus on measuring actual dollars spent or even time spent studying as a quantifiable indicator of student achievement. There was absolutely no serious thought given to the link between economic capital and cultural capital transmitted to different levels of society (48). In his discussion of cultural capital, Bourdieu goes to great lengths to illuminate distinctions between cultural and economic capital; he describes the net effects or profits gained when either type of capital is transmitted and ultimately reproduced in society. There are two aspects of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital that undergird my claim about the value of ExL as the irrefutable gateway for first-year (and first-generation) college students. The first is his recognition of cultural capital as *the work of acquisition*; the second is its rather hidden or invisible nature. The acquisition aspect suggests that gains in cultural capital are the result of work over time—not a specific time period, but enough time to reflect the relevant knowledge and values of a particular social class or situation. In other words, cultural capital cannot be transmitted instantly but rather it is accumulated in ways that define its success in terms of assimilation and even mastery. If we accept this explanation, then there is real value in exposing students to situations in which they can begin to sow the seeds necessary to acquire cultural capital early on. The invisible or hidden transmission of acquisition is also apparent when we speak about first-year composition students. In our composition classrooms, we are always striving to transmit and reproduce a level of competency in the structure of our assignments, our style of response to student essays, and so on. It is often not until our students have some breakthrough in the process—an aha! moment—that we can really be sure that they have acquired the capital of written literacy. The speed with which this acquisition happens, Bourdieu tells us, is also linked to the initial accumulation and transmission of cultural capital from the outset, or let's say from parents or the immediate home environment to students or their children. Children from families "endowed with strong cultural capital" and exposed at an early age will assimilate faster (49). This brings us to a third type of capital requisite for student

success—social capital—which Bourdieu defines thusly:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (51).

Bourdieu’s theory of forms of capital presents a unique opportunity for writing programs around the issue of engagement, and quite possibly insight into what ails public education in America.

I am in good company when it comes to pondering ways to address deficiencies in first-year students and seeing the transformative power of ExL as a pathway to student engagement. The statistics at my regional campus are alarmingly consistent with the national statistics on the effects of student engagement on the success of first-year college students. Paradoxically, now more than ever, even though there seem to be greater numbers of students—especially those from historically underserved populations—entering college, there are staggeringly fewer who seem to finish. George Kuh and his colleagues reported recently in *The Journal of Higher Education* that “Only half (51%) of students who enrolled at four-year institutions in 1995-96 completed bachelor’s degrees within six years at the institutions at which they started.” The figures are even more dismal for those who transferred and attended two or more institutions prior to obtaining baccalaureate degrees (540). If students are leaving early, then they are leaving with little or no opportunity to acquire cultural or social capital, which begs the question: *If we seize the opportunity of first-year writing to expose students to social networks and teach them how to navigate cultural contexts, might they stay?*

The external pressures placed on higher education experience regarding completion and graduation rates are very present, very real: “Students leave college for a mix of individual and institutional reasons: change of major, lack of money, family demands, and poor psycho-social fit, among others” (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, and Kinzie 541). In fact, there have been numerous studies which take up each of these economic and social reasons, individually and in relation to one another which have yielded solid information for educators to propose interventions in the first and second year college experience. And even though we recognize these individual factors and persist in our interventions, something gets lost in the translation when we try to universalize our approach to addressing student engagement. Take Braxton’s 2006 *National Postsecondary Education Cooperative* study that concluded there are “eight domains of student success that warrant attention” and specifies preparation for adulthood and citizenship, personal accomplishments, and personal development, as three of those domains. One year later, a literature review sponsored by the same organization and this time led

by George Kuh restated these areas in a broader fashion, for example, “engagement in educationally purposeful activities” and “acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies.” While this later language may move us closer to measuring educational outcomes, I cannot help but think about what we lose when we erase the language pointing to *personal* development, *personal* accomplishment *and* preparation for *citizenship*. The importance of those attributes is minimized if not fully effaced.

The questions guiding Kuh’s later study sought to determine the impact of engagement on student success in the first year of college and net effects of pre-college achievement and experiences. The later study aimed to determine whether the effects of that engagement were general or conditional, in other words, widely observed or specific to some condition like gender or strength of pre-college preparation. Kuh’s study is an elegant account of social, economic, and cultural factors that embody two significant takeaways for those of us engaged in teaching composition in the freshman year. The first finding states “student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is positively related to academic outcomes as represented by first-year student grades and by persistence between the first and second year of college.” The really interesting news behind this finding is that while pre-college experiences (read: preparation) matter where first-year grades are concerned, once there has been a meaningful first-year experience the net effect of pre-college preparation “diminishes considerably.” The second finding states that “engagement has a compensatory effect on first-year grades and persistence to the second year of college at the same institution. We are more likely to retain students, in other words, regardless of their backgrounds and risk factors, if they have been involved in developing cultural capital and thus participating in social networks on campus” (Kuh et al., 555).

Some clarification is necessary here regarding the usage of the phrase *student engagement*. The discourse of education tends to identify activities designed to enrich student engagement such as first-year experience courses or supplemental instruction. The kind of engagement I am advocating is immersion in real-world writing situations that require students to research, write, and think beyond the boundaries of a textbook or classroom space; the kind of engagement that allows students to acquire cultural and social capital while meeting the demands of their subject matter assignments; the kind of engagement that blurs the lines between their college experience and their personal life and puts them immediately on a pathway to student success. Studies conducted by BCSSE and NSSE show a sharp contrast in what faculty members and institutions provide in the way of academic and non-academic experiences and the significantly higher expectations of students. On almost every data point—rigor of academics, opportunities for social interaction with faculty and students, and so on—what participating institutions delivered fell far short of student expectations. On the other hand, when a pilot group in that same survey was isolated to participate in customized learning activities that were collaborative, provided social opportunities with diverse stu-

dents and faculty, and upped the ante on academics, students reported significant gains in their experience of the first year of college (NSSE 2011).

## Thoughts on Course Design

Esperanza worked diligently over an eight-week period interviewing board members, situating her knowledge of literacy centers, soliciting letters of support from the community and complaining less and less about the workload. Because of her outside responsibilities and childcare challenges, I became her *de facto* teammate. I shared my own samples of grants written over a ten-year period, and helped her after hours and on weekends in coffee shops to craft language appropriate for a panel of blind reviewers. Others in the class worked in teams of two or three and, while their projects were slightly less ambitious, their enthusiasm was just as fervent. Perhaps the biggest decision regarding course design that has carried over from the initial experience is that the experiential projects are not an optional assignment in the course; everyone must participate with a partner or in a team of three. The second characteristic is that at least one student in the team must have an existing connection to the group or organization, or at least a genuine area of inquiry to drive their investigations with the community partner. Herein lies the answer to the biggest criticism I hear when I speak to colleagues about wide-scale application of ExL in composition classes. They say it can't be done because of the sheer numbers of students filtering through our programs (3800 each academic year in my case); there aren't enough organizations to tap into, exclaim the naysayers. The bigger part of that issue is, and I agree, managing so many community relationships in a responsible, ethical way. I am not saying our system is without flaws, but I am saying that waiting until we have it all figured out is not the solution. On the first point about having enough project sites, in three years of adopting this experiential approach in our second semester course we have never even come close to being at a loss for project sites. Some students take the obvious routes of partnering with local non-profits. Charities are chosen because someone on the team has a personal connection—a loved one has been diagnosed or lost to a disease. Others research, write and offer recommendations to campus units like the Honors Program (again, typically someone in the group is a member) or tackle more widespread campus issues like the parking problem. The key lies in the authentic connection. It is essential for students to find value in a group they already belong to; it is way we begin to seed their personal power. If students can redefine their existing affiliations through the lens of academic discourse, then we accelerate the process of them building cultural capital.

Sometimes a class will identify a theme, like nutrition, and all of the projects in that class will investigate some aspect of nutrition. In a recent example, one group in a class working collaboratively on nutrition had a nursing student in the group and developed a webzine and social media accounts to share information with students about making healthy eating choices. A group in that same class

wrote a children's book targeting childhood obesity and developed a fictional character, Riley the Rabbit, who was in a race to making better choices in the face of a world of temptations. That particular group conducted an online interview with an administrator at a pediatric clinic several states away as well as a third grade elementary teacher at a rural school that had recently been in the news for their innovative approaches to dealing with childhood obesity. To date, both the pediatric clinic and the third grade class have purchased sets of Riley's Race for a fall 2012 adoption.

These ExL projects are not all fun and games; the student teams usually encounter serious frustration defining their projects and establishing a workable project plan. I also remind instructors teaching the course to warn students that things will fall apart: their community contact will go AWOL; their group members will not post the meeting notes to the wiki in a timely fashion—or ever; the direction of their project will shift. In the next breath, I tell them that all of this adversity is unexpected but not unwelcome; the teachable moments abound in and through how well they are able to address challenges *in writing*. Students and instructors find comfort in knowing that their job is not to make whatever problems they encounter disappear, but rather explain the circumstances, regroup and adjust their plan and explain it—*in writing*.

It happened with Esperanza. We ran through three different contacts at the foundation and endless red tape securing approval from the soon-to-be defunct literacy center board to grant permission to make application for the funds. There wasn't enough time to research sufficiently and write the narrative, but we submitted the grant in spite of ourselves and miracles do happen: the request—two years' salary support for an Executive Director—was approved. Esperanza was the new face of literacy in Wrightsville; it was a watershed moment that changed my teaching forever. The following semester, I introduced the project day one so that students could take full advantage of having enough time to think through their group affiliations. As fate would have it, one of the students in class volunteered at the literacy center, and another student had visited the literacy center on a few occasions with a neighbor—a retired school teacher. These students were aware of Esperanza's recent hire, but they were not familiar with the details of the class project. A few weeks later, when asked to begin writing to explore their existing group memberships, these same two students expressed an interest in doing a project connected to the literacy center. The need: to create a training manual for community volunteers who represented various levels of education and various walks of life. There was a third generation of the Wrightsville Literacy project one year later when another group of students decided to develop a marketing plan to create awareness and visibility for the center on campus and throughout the community.

I want to be perfectly clear that I am not advocating for a reductionist and uncritical approach to ExL. There are significant issues concerning large-scale adoption and integration of ExL into composition programs. There is the ethical dilemma of managing a pipeline of students dispatched to engage with the larger

community. Perhaps the question that haunts me most is *what are students getting out of what we are doing and how can I know for sure?* ExL should be more than just “a path from the classroom to the community.” Rather we should be aiming for a materialist rhetoric that begins when we “use the laboratory of community-based writing projects in order to generate new questions for rhetorical theory, rhetorical practice, and rhetorical education” (Coogan 670).

Our first-year students are not ready to take up the task of transforming the field of rhetorical education, but I do know our students are quite capable of transforming themselves through civic and personal education. The idea of harnessing public power to evoke personal transformation has been written about by Higgins, Long, and Flower and they, too, acknowledge that we should be talking about transformation in relationship to it being one measure or outcome in assessment. In fact, they write very candidly about the observable confidence that student-rhetors develop as they find their voice and begin to realize that their community/audience stakeholders are invested and interested in what they bring to the table, in what they have *to say*:

For all the bravado displayed by teens in our projects, for all the self-confidence they exude in each other’s company, they often fail to believe that adults can or will listen to them or even that they should. They, and many disenfranchised stakeholders we have worked with, often buy into dominant discourses that construct them as *the problem*, rather than people with potential to solve problems, and as incapable or untrustworthy rhetors with nothing worthwhile to contribute. At first tentative about their own ability to speak and be heard these stakeholders become more confident as they talk across the table, are acknowledged by others, and see their private memories and feelings celebrated in print. (192)

## Conclusion

Responsible writing program administration means striking the right balance between helping students integrate their academic and personal lives and teaching them the strategies required to do so. Here are some strategies on programmatic, institutional, and national levels to help us move closer to the reality of integrating ExL into composition studies.

A first step should involve establishing parameters for community-based writing projects that the instructional staff feels confident and comfortable to implement. At PUC we have a cadre of instructors for whom our ExL research course hinges on print-based textual production that is decided upon in consultation with the community groups’ needs. A second cadre of instructors embraces a multimodal approach to teaching; production for students in these sections requires podcasts, scripts, and webzines as evidence. Yet a third approach strongly recommended for those new to the program is writing *about* the community. These research projects are informed by field work (i.e. interviews and observations); however, they are less dependent on instructors and students producing



texts in genres for which the conventions of same may be unfamiliar. Above all, programs should place a premium on teacher training to ensure best practices—academic and cultural—as well as ethical conduct and consistency in delivering instruction. While the goal is not and will never be to have every section duplicate the exact same experience, writing program administrators must be realistic about the fact that instructors will bring varying levels of workplace writing experience to these teaching situations and must fill in the gaps accordingly.

Writing programs must also recognize the impact of formalized assessment practices on ExL. Some possibilities include surveying students on their pre-college experiences and preparation, documenting the list of community partners students are working with, collecting and analyzing data regarding retention rates for students from the first to the second year, writing assessments that compare students' competence prior to take the freshman course with an experiential component and then again at later data points to determine the long-term impact of collaborative learning on student success. The best assessment designs will take into account the unique local characteristics embedded in the program and institutional context. All programs in the end will benefit from the legitimacy that comes as the result of engaging in sustained reflective practice.

Programs must work within their institutions to formalize partnerships with other academic units focused on student success: financial aid, centers for student achievement, placement offices/advising, and so on. It is important to ensure that community-based writing projects are being carried out in a way that is appropriate and consistent with the university's mission. In my case at PUC, ExL is a cornerstone of the campus's decadal plan as well as the overall strategic plan. If this kind of explicit support for experiential activities is not part of the institutional culture, then it is critical that the writing program administrator or instructional staff working with students find a way to plug-in to the mission with ExL as the preferred pathway. For instance, for campuses that have identified technology as a priority, designing a course that takes advantage of the full complement of multimodal affordances may be the way to go. If global education is a priority and ExL is not, then introducing students to more diverse community resources or other faculty with a different background may be the way to go.

Finally, in the spirit of the language that framed the WPA outcomes statement over ten years ago, I would like to see community-based writing assignments written into the statement to ensure that programs nationally are thinking about this as a pathway to student engagement and student success. In addition to the outcomes stated by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, here is what we have written into the outcomes for first-year writing at Purdue University Calumet:

### Community-Based Writing

- Engage students in exploring their existing community connections and group memberships as potential sites for research and writing

- Practice modes of inquiry related to field work
- Analyze issues from a variety of theoretical lenses including cultural, historical, political, etc.
- Teach students what it means to situate knowledge in various contexts
- Collaborate with peers in making choices and producing texts using multimodal affordances
- Reflect on the experiential process
- Disseminate the experiential projects to a campus and/or community audience.

In many ways our work has only just begun when it comes to being able to offer up a complete model for assessing the range of community-based projects that occur in our writing classrooms. We have come very far in articulating our goals in terms that make sense for the university community and our outcomes in ways that help instructors and students grasp the connection between what we are teaching, what they should be learning, and how it will be useful immediately in their personal and professional lives. At PUC like at so many campuses, we recognize the value of being proactive where assessment is concerned. The difference here is where we choose to start the conversation. We are not putting the cart before the horse, but we are showing students the contents of the cart and encouraging them to remove those items most familiar and most interesting to them to share the saddle as they ride off into the sunset of the most important years of their lives.

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