



# A Critical Thinking/ Discipline Specific Model for Teaching Writing through Service Learning

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## I. Introduction: The Problem of Institutionalization

Edward Zlotkowski, writing in the journal *Change* in 1996, offers the following observation about the present state of service learning at universities across the nation:

How is it possible for service-related activities to be enjoying record levels of acceptance on campuses across the country—acceptance among faculty and administrators as well as students—and at the same time, for the service movement to have made relatively little impact on the culture and consciousness of the academy in general, on the way in which its members define themselves and their work? (23).

Assuming real academic currency as a goal for service learning if it is to survive in any respectable manner, Zlotkowski goes on to suggest that service learning's ability to achieve this goal depends upon its enacting "some important strategic adjustments" (24) by which service learning becomes academically rather than "moralistically" driven. In the context of the university today, where academic validity is primarily a function of disciplinary specialization, Zlotkowski sees little choice but for service learning to define its pedagogy in terms of "specific disciplinary and interdisciplinary goals" (25).

Certainly, operationalizing this goal seems relatively uncomplicated when teaching in fields that are, in fact, marked by a definable body of disciplinary knowledge—biology, political science, marketing, mechanical engineering, to

name a few. What becomes less easily discernible, however, is just how to dig in to disciplinary-focused teaching in fields that are, by virtue of their function in the academy, extra-disciplinary. No other field, we would venture to say, faces this challenge with more difficulty than the teaching of undergraduate writing. Whether housed by English departments or in independent programs, the teaching of writing has become, both academically and institutionally, essentially extra-disciplinary—underfunded, understaffed, and underprofessionalized. If service learning in the context of writing instruction is to gain the academic currency that seems more readily available to service learning in the context of specific disciplines, then we have to find approaches that allow, at least, an anchor in the notion of disciplinarity. It is certainly true that service learning taught in composition courses can take on the disciplinary focus of the field in which students are writing; this is most evident in courses that focus on engineering and business writing, for example. But this disciplinary focus is not always the case in more general writing courses and has not necessarily been the focus of service learning composition teachers to date, as we will show in our overview of service learning pedagogies in the next section of this paper.

Our newly-developed course in the University Writing Program at the University of Colorado at Boulder offers a model of teaching upper-division writing that helps move us towards the goal of establishing academic legitimacy through disciplinarity. To be sure, the course builds on previous pedagogical models of service learning that call for significant community and political involvement by students. And the course is careful to allow for an equitable dynamic between ivory tower and community—something to which Linda Flower has recently drawn attention. But, more important for the concern at hand, the course forms an alliance between a somewhat more traditional rhetorical strategies approach and a Writing in the Disciplines (or WID) approach to establish academic legitimacy through a discipline-specific model. It is somewhat obvious that one of the best allies that a service learning writing course has is a discipline-focussed approach to writing, such as WID or WAC, and we don't claim to be the first to point this out. We take our lead here from, amongst others, Tom Deans' preliminary comments regarding the relationship between service learning and WAC, which

suggest that an alliance between service learning and WID can ensure service learning's longevity within the academy.

However, it seems that too often WID can end up being taught with undue attention to format and other surface-level concerns of producing documents, to the detriment of developing students' critical consciousnesses needed to write effectively and responsibly within and about their chosen fields. Thus our fear is that without a strong critical thinking component to WID, discipline-specific writing may lose its potential to move students beyond a simple grasp of discipline-specific genres toward an ability to solve problems in necessary social and political contexts. And if one of the goals of service learning is to expose students to the real social and political contexts in which they must and will do their disciplinary work, then critical thinking is essential to any meaningful service experience. To give students this ability, teachers of service learning must consider carefully both what they mean by critical thinking and how they might teach such cognitive skills within particular fields of study. John Dewey, a founding figure of critical thinking as we know it today, still offers one of the most useful definitions of critical thinking. Dewey conceptualizes critical thinking as an "experimental method" of gaining knowledge. For Dewey, knowledge is not so much a stable body of ideas, as it is a set of hypothetical assumptions that we test and improve through creative and inquisitive thinking. Thus for Dewey, critical thinking is a vital step towards logic and problem solving. Dewey's ideas are particularly useful for our critical thinking/discipline-specific model because they remind us that knowledge, but perhaps especially disciplinary knowledge, despite its many fixed conventions, is simultaneously fluid; it is a product of ongoing inquiry for which critical thinking serves as a crucial catalyst.

Recently, more politically-situated scholars such as Henry Giroux and bell hooks have considered critical thinking in ways that are vital for service-learning. Both Giroux and hooks see education as a form of cultural politics whose mission is to prepare students for participation in democratic life; they argue that one of the teacher's indispensable roles is to develop students' critical voices so that they may inquire and challenge current social and political formations in developing their own critical consciousness. For Giroux, the failure of democracy in America has at its roots the "refusal

to grant public schooling a significant role in the ongoing process of educating people to be active and critical citizens capable of fighting for and reconstructing democratic public life” (199). For hooks, education is about the “practice of freedom” (4) whereby students learn to engage and critique systems of domination and discrimination; critical thinking, argues hooks, is the essential means for achieving these pedagogical goals. Like Dewey, then, Giroux and hooks do not see education as the simple acquisition of knowledge, but as something more active and dynamic that has real consequences for individual students, for disciplinary knowledge, and for society at large.

It seems, then, that critical thinking, as envisioned by these scholars, provides a pedagogical framework that would dovetail well with service learning’s goals of civic awareness; in turn, service learning provides a fruitful context for teaching critical thinking because of the multi-faceted dynamic it presents to students as they step outside of the classroom into the larger community. Indeed, Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles’s recent volume *Where’s the Learning in Service Learning?* presents data from two national research projects to support the claim that service learning can teach critical thinking skills. However, they warn that courses have to be carefully designed so as to develop such skills. The course we discuss below is an attempt to develop students’ high-order cognitive skills in the context of specific disciplinary knowledge. We believe that this approach not only gives students the critical consciousness they need to produce valuable academic work and to live as active citizens beyond the ivory tower, but also helps institutionalize service learning as a credible pedagogical approach. This paper, then, will outline the pedagogical basis of our course and will explain how that basis translates into a host of practical matters including pre-course project development and agency liaison, the nature of specific projects and the necessity of matching students with appropriate projects, actual classroom instruction, and agency-student-academy dynamics. Moreover, it will examine—in the contexts of classroom instruction and actual student work—the way in which the course encourages the development of knowledge as the product of critical inquiry within a student’s particular field of study. Ultimately, the paper works towards articulating how this approach can further institutionalize service learning by prioritizing critical thinking in the context of disciplinarity.

## II. The Evolution of Service Learning in the Writing Classroom

Early approaches to teaching writing through service learning conceived of writing assignments largely in terms of students' personal responses to service completed for an agency. One of the most popular venues for this approach was tutoring, most commonly in adult literacy centers, where students responded to the experience of tutoring and service functioned as a means for, primarily, students' personal growth. Responses to this largely journalistic approach have re-thought service learning in a variety of ways. For one, service learning is sometimes used as a way for students to gather research data for term papers. Another revisionist approach—sometimes called a “leadership” approach—uses service learning to provide students with “value-added” skills that will enhance their resumes and allow them to compete more successfully on the job market. Both of the latter approaches give service learning a more functional, rather than personal, exigency. Recent critics have responded to both the experiential and functional approaches with concerns regarding the possible absence of real social engagement and academic rigor. Susan Stroud, director of Campus Compact, has warned:

If our community service efforts are not structured to raise the questions that result in critical analysis of the issues, then we are not involved in education and social change—we are involved in charity. (3)

As teachers of writing have heeded Stroud's caveat, they have revised previous models of service learning to enable students to analyze critically the complex social and political issues they encounter in service learning placements. Certainly, one noteworthy response is offered in Bruce Herzberg's much-cited “Community Service and Critical Teaching.” Herzberg shares Stroud's concern that service learning writing courses nurture students' more private experiences in lieu of critical intellectual development and active participation in the public realm. As he notes, “Writing personal responses to community service experiences is an important part of processing the experience, but it is not sufficient to raise critical or cultural consciousness” (309). Herzberg adapts the literacy model of teaching writing through service learn-

ing by juxtaposing critical texts, such as Jonathon Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, with student service in an adult literacy center. This adaptation enables his students to complete writing assignments that grapple with questions regarding inequitable social structures and ideologies surrounding adult literacy in the United States. Other writing courses and programs across the country have developed various permutations of this approach. For example, the Michigan State University Service Learning Writing Project has incorporated a similar kind of logic into writing classes that focus on issues of democracy and civil society.

The above-mentioned pedagogies—insofar as they require students to write *about* the service they perform—pose challenges to the teaching of discipline-specific writing that has come to characterize much of the current discussion of upper-division writing instruction. Certainly, if students are writing for their teachers, there is room for critical thinking. The notions of audience and purpose, however, remain less immediate, and the application to discipline-specific writing is not immediately discernible. Such work involves students in education, but nevertheless holds social involvement at bay, asking students to think about problems but not to solve them actively.

Another strand of service learning, which conceives of student writing *as* rather than *about* service, can provide a fruitful way out of this bind. Paul Heilker of Stanford University argues, in “Rhetoric Made Real: Civic Discourse and Writing Beyond the Curriculum,” for an approach to service learning that defines “writing as social action” (74). In this course, according to Heilker, students “actually complete essential writing tasks for the non-profit agencies in which they are placed” (74). Thus, Heilker argues, students encounter a real rhetorical situation in which they complete real tasks that have real purposes and real audiences. Students must understand the “philosophy” of the agency and, by writing from within the agency, from a position of “true authority” in the community, students gain the power to change through their own words—albeit modestly—the worlds in which they work. This model, Heilker contends, enables students to learn “the values and utter necessity of active, participatory, informed, responsible, rhetorical citizenship” (76).

If students are placed in actual agencies, then they are simultaneously and inevitably immersed in whatever profes-

sional field(s) that agency is privy to. Questions of audience and genre are no longer mere classroom constructs but are agency realities. Thus the writing *as* service approach can provide fertile ground for the future of service learning not just because it offers the immediacy of community participation, but also because it presents the potential for students to engage in critical analysis while practicing discipline-specific discourse. However, the two concepts, service and learning, become dynamically interwoven only if the type of learning under this model aids in awarding service learning substantive academic rigor.

### **III. Writing Program Goals at the University of Colorado at Boulder**

The University of Colorado at Boulder's Writing Program demands a strong emphasis on critical thinking. We teach that knowledge and learning result from an ongoing process of inquiry, assertion, critique, and revision; in our minds, writing at the university level should reflect this process. Thus, in all our writing classes, analysis and argument play an integral part because they are two of the most appropriate tools by which students can engage in such intellectual inquiry. Especially for upper-division students, description, while necessary to complete analysis and argument, is not in and of itself acceptable as a major writing assignment. Descriptive writing, we feel, too easily elicits the mere demonstration of existing knowledge, rather than the higher-order critical thinking encouraged by Dewey, Giroux, and hooks for the reasons we discuss earlier. Essentially, then, our courses train students in the strategies and nuances of critical academic discourse.

Increasingly, however, our upper-division courses are moving towards situating writing within specific disciplines whereby students address the contexts and constraints that shape discipline-specific writing and, where appropriate, examine the very discursive nature of disciplinary knowledge. Arts and Sciences students choose from a wide variety of topic-centered writing courses, many of which demand that students choose appropriate "real world" genres to achieve their rhetorical purposes. For example, a student in *Writing on Contemporary Women Writers* might be asked to write a letter to a school board arguing that Joyce Carol Oates's "Small Avalanches" is or is not appropriate reading for a high school

junior. Engineering students in *Writing on Science and Society* might write a letter to the editor about an article in the *New York Times Science Times* or might write a popular magazine article analyzing some issue in their specific discipline.

#### **IV. Our Model: Course Rationale and Design**

In our course, students' writing *is* service; it is the means and end to service. Our students complete essential writing tasks for non-profit agencies in which they are placed. Thus our students work with content provided by agencies in order to reach real audiences. They have a supervisor in the agency and have to present their work orally to a live and relevant audience at the end of the semester. More importantly, our course requires students to approach critically the written projects in their own fields of academic and personal expertise. The course itself demands that projects meet three criteria. They must demand analysis and argument; they must allow students to work in their field of expertise; and they must be developed using multiple sources of input. These three criteria shape course design. We will look at each in turn.

Under our critical thinking/discipline-specific model, projects are set up through collaboration between the instructor and various interested agencies before the semester begins. Because of our critical thinking approach, we design projects whose actual content—rather than just planning or design—requires some level of data analysis or problem solving. Indeed, this is the very essence of a critical inquiry/WID approach: writing must bridge academy and professional field. So, a purely informational brochure, for which critical thinking would at best be part of the planning process, would not be acceptable as a major project, even though an agency might need such a document. Instead, the projects must require students to think through a problem or solution by analyzing information critically, with the goal of making a recommendation to an audience with a real stake in the agency.

Most projects require students to examine the raw data of a problematic situation, for example, and then make some sense of it by interpreting the data and/or by recommending and arguing for a solution. Some projects our students complete are—among others—scientific reports, grant proposals, and business plans. For example, a local science museum



asked two students to analyze visitor response to its exhibits and recommend how the museum might better serve visitors. The students designed a visitor survey and analyzed survey results to make several recommendations. In all cases, students must provide reasoned analysis to support their proposed assessment or solution. In other words, they must judge critically the data they gather or receive from the agency and hypothesize about its meaning; their writing itself must articulate that critical thinking. Students thus engage themselves in Dewey's "experimental" form of thinking. We ask that agencies have the necessary demographic, cultural, or organizational data with which our students will need to work and for which the necessary critical thinking has yet to be done. If agencies don't have this information readily available, they work with students to gather it. In this preliminary stage, agencies provide the context and background necessary for making the project discipline-specific. Since agencies function in "fields" roughly related to the academy's disciplinary classifications, they can provide necessary protocols, not only on genre, but also on more localized issues of exigency and politics regarding specific written documents.

The second element of design concerns student placement in appropriate agencies. Obviously, if the course is to teach discipline-specific writing, then students must work on projects and in agencies that demand and teach writing specific to their own academic fields. To realize this goal, we match projects with students who have relevant disciplinary expertise. At the beginning of the semester, students undergo an "application" process. Students submit a job application package to two agencies whose projects are most closely aligned with their field of study—and for which they have some appropriate academic training or personal experience. Certainly, this assignment allows students to prepare for later job applications in a competitive job market, but for our immediate purposes, it allows agencies to choose the "applicant/s" best qualified to complete their projects. (Agencies reserve the right to reject any or all applicants.) Because students in the course are in upper-division Business, Engineering, or Arts and Sciences disciplines, they have some academic expertise on which they can draw to complete projects. A marketing major, for example, might apply for and work on a project requiring a marketing strategy while a political science major might take on a project demanding the analysis

of demographic information for a more politically-oriented project. Agencies have been generally impressed with students' qualifications, with many agencies wanting more students than we can provide. We also set up ample placements, so the scenario where a student fails to be placed is unlikely.

To ensure that students understand what critical thinking projects demand, as well as how projects are unique to a particular field, we require them to submit project proposals once they are placed with an agency. These proposals must outline a project's rhetorical situation, document design, and timeline before work on the project begins. Both agency and instructor approve the written proposal. This application process allows room for personal interest and expertise too, both of which are important—as much research demonstrates—for students to produce effective writing. One of our recent students—a single mother who has volunteered extensively for the campus parent-students association—worked on a project for a local human services office that determined and analyzed the unmet childcare needs of parents enrolled in certain welfare programs. She was able to use both her personal interest and experience in carrying out a worthwhile project for the agency.

A final element of design is the process by which students develop project content. Because our program's goals rest on the idea of knowledge as a form of inquiry—as opposed to knowledge as pre-existing—we insist that students go beyond gathering information from either agencies or academic texts. Both of these options would result in mere descriptive renditions of pre-existing ideas. Rather, students must negotiate the knowledge necessary for compiling the written document by addressing the concerns of three groups with which they are faced:

- First, they must address the academy's goals of critical thinking. As students begin the process of analyzing their data, instructors provide training in critical thinking and rhetorical strategies by way of weekly in-class instruction and a series of in-class workshops in which instructors and student peers press writers on issues of logic and development. The weekly workshops form an essential part of the ongoing re-thinking and re-writing process students must engage in to produce effective documents. Consequently, students become savvy critics of texts, a skill they can transfer to other contexts.

- Second, they must address the agency's requirement for a field-specific document. To produce documents that agencies can actually use, students must learn from their agencies not only what general types of documents they desire, but also what the specific contexts surrounding these documents are. Who, for example, are the voices that need representation and how are those voices most appropriately represented? What, for example, are the politically sensitive issues in a project and how do students write, or not write, about those issues while still producing a relevant document? Two students in a recent class who completed a document for a local social services agency, encountered various political alignments and misalignments among the staff surrounding the particular issue with which they were working. These students had to negotiate this political reality as they grappled with document content, a skill they will take with them as they enter the job market.
  
- And third, students must address their student peers' concerns. During in-class workshops, students comment on one another's drafts. Writers essentially represent the agencies for whom they are completing the document and peers serve as outside readers, critics, or assistants. The cross-disciplinary makeup of the class enables a comprehensive inquiry into the rhetorical makeup of the document and allows students to learn how to speak to others outside their discipline. While this last objective may seem to run counter to the narrow academic sophistication we suggest in the opening paragraphs of this paper, it can also afford students an awareness of the differences between writing in different disciplines. Moreover, the ability to communicate across disciplinary boundaries is a skill necessary for future academic, community, or professional work that students will conduct. We think it important, albeit not primary, for students to practice it.

Each student, therefore, participates in three concurrent conversations: with their agency, with their peers, and with the academy. To enable this rather elaborate process of inquiry, we rely on Linda Flower's notions of "rival hypotheses" and "multi-voiced inquiry" as outlined in her textbook,

*Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing in College and Community.* Flower's notion of rival hypotheses, which has its origins in Dewey's notion of "experimental" ways of knowing, calls on students to start thinking about their projects not from a fixed point of view but by opening up a question or questions at issue. Students then consider as many alternative responses to those questions as they can. Multi-voiced inquiry asks students to further evaluate issues in a way that does "justice to multiple ways of perceiving the world and representing knowledge (418). Multi-voice inquiry also helps develop the active and critical thinking that Giroux and hooks argue is essential to a meaningful education.

This link between critical thinking and discipline specificity is reinforced by an oral presentation requirement, fulfilled towards the end of semester, in which students present their work orally to a live and relevant audience—either another wing of the same agency, another agency, or a citizens' group. The oral presentation constitutes yet another form of dialogue by which students can gather additional feedback on their works-in-progress—feedback they must incorporate into their projects. Because we encourage students to present to other community groups whose interests might be related to what our students are working on, students have yet another avenue for broadening their contact with the community. One student, for example, who worked on a resource guide on alternative transportation for the university's environmental center, planned her presentation for administrators at another college campus to try to persuade them to adopt these alternatives.

Finally, we schedule a series of six in-class "business" meetings throughout the course, chaired by groups of two to three students. We assign readings on civic issues around which students base their meetings; students generate scenarios in which class members role play appropriate meeting attendees. Thus, meeting chairs carry the class through a discussion on important social and political issues by way of an agenda. To this end, we select readings such as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," case studies on welfare and on the debate over funding for the arts, and extracts from Studs Terkel's *Working*.

## V. Case Studies: Two Success Stories

The goals of our course were realized in Lisa and Josh, two students from a recent class. Lisa, a psychology major with a career planned in elementary education, had past work experience in both a children's home in an African country and in a metropolitan area children's museum. For her, then, the project at another local children's museum was a natural fit. This museum had just lost one of its major grants and therefore saw the necessity of strengthening, rhetorically, its *raison d'être* in order to secure monies for its future survival. With the museum director and another intern, Lisa completed a grant writing team that researched grant opportunities and completed two grant proposals. Lisa's conversations with her agency supervisor (the museum director) guided her thinking as she sifted through information about hundreds of available proposals. Lisa was able to bring her disciplinary experience in education to bear on the innovative thinking required to argue that the museum deserved grants aimed at assisting minority children in educational arenas. And at the same time, the writing class provided peer review, pushing Lisa to make multi-voiced inquiries and to consider different rhetorical strategies as she analyzed what the museum offers these children in terms of educational programs, volunteer opportunities, and community involvement, in order to make a larger persuasive argument about the necessity of ongoing funding. Clearly, the critical thinking that Lisa engaged in required her to push beyond the limits of existing knowledge to experiment with new ways of arguing for the museum. But such a project also enabled her to use the critical thinking necessary to fight for the survival of an agency that she saw as a valuable contribution towards an equitable society.

In some cases, students choose to apply for projects because of personal experience or conviction as much as from disciplinary interest. Josh, a business student with a focus in finance and information systems, applied for and was selected to work with a human service agency serving the disabled. Josh's project asked him to determine whether the agency had an image problem and to recommend how to solve that problem if it existed. Josh's business focus certainly made him aware of the importance of agency image and gave him skills in the kind of meticulous planning a research design needed. But Josh was drawn to this agency for a more

personal reason: his younger sister is disabled. He was interested in working with an agency that strives to help the disabled population live more independently.

Josh's project also called on a Deweyan "experimental" approach towards his problem and the information he gathered. Josh designed questionnaires (with some assistance from our campus research office) and interviewed agency staff and clients, as well as community members, to test some of his rival hypotheses: perhaps the agency had no image problem; perhaps clients' needs were not being met because the disabled misunderstood the agency's mission; perhaps the community didn't understand the agency's identity, and therefore didn't understand and couldn't take advantage of it. Josh's preliminary research led him to believe that, while staff and clients were pleased with the agency's work, the community had little idea what its goals were and how it actually served the community. He supplemented this with published literature on the topic and he collected information, via the internet, about similar agencies across the nation. His analysis of all this information led him to recommend that the agency consider a new name and a new logo that better situate it in the Boulder community and that more clearly distinguish its mission from that of larger government agencies.

Like Lisa, Josh built a persuasive document by combining his agency supervisor's support, his disciplinary knowledge (in research design and systematic analysis of results) and his personal interest in the project. Just as importantly, he used in-class workshops to grapple with strategies that allowed him to present his recommendation persuasively. Further, in order to present his recommendations orally to agency staff, Josh had to again engage in the analysis necessary to turn a written document into an effective presentation. Josh's presentation impressed staff members enough that they asked him to give his presentation again—to the agency's Board of Directors. His independent project had validated a "feeling" they'd had about the agency's image, and they wanted him, as an outside consultant, to impress his findings on their governing board. Clearly, both Josh and Lisa had to adapt discipline-specific content to academically demanding writing tasks. In doing so, they went beyond a personal response to service and intellectual contemplation of social issues to actually effect change in community service agencies and the populations they serve. In ef-

fect, then, both students used critical thinking on a more intellectual, Deweyan, level, but they also used it in the sense that Giroux and hooks intend—to become active inquirers into social formations in their communities so as to work as agents of social change.

## VI. Pitfalls

Certainly, the course is not without its problems. And, as might be expected, we encounter pitfalls for each segment of our collaborative effort: for agencies, for students, and for us as instructors. When agencies agree to take part in our service learning course, we explain that we cannot guarantee student placement with them. And, in fact, last semester no students applied to work for one of the agencies whose project description had been carefully prepared and delivered. This agency undoubtedly was disappointed that it was unable to complete (or had to reassign already scarce resources to) a project it looked forward to completing. We hope that this experience does not keep the agency from working with us again. Once agencies accept students, they run a further risk of being dissatisfied with those students' performance. We are careful to emphasize, on the first day of class, that continued enrollment past the first week indicates a commitment to an agency. And, in fact, most students follow through on their commitment and agencies are pleased with their work. Last semester, one student, however, simply quit attending class and, after two initial meetings, the agency never heard from him again. Fortunately for us, the agency supervisor viewed this "desertion" as an anomaly, and is eager to work with us again.

Students, too, face some difficulties. As we have already noted, some students find themselves negotiating agency politics and thus having to spend valuable project time on this task rather than on fulfilling the project goals as originally defined. Certainly this happenstance is a source of frustration for these students. Other students find themselves not in the midst of agency culture, but strangely outside it. These students are often left largely on their own to design research, carry it out, and write their analysis. Despite the frustration these scenarios cause, we believe them to be important learning experiences in the kind of cultural politics that concern Giroux and hooks. Yet another possible difficulty is exemplified in a project whose critical thinking demands

shifted once in the student's hands. Despite our advice about approaches to the project that would meet both agency and course goals, the student pursued a descriptive document. While the agency was quite pleased with the final product, it did not fulfill the course goals, so the student faced a project grade lower than he would otherwise have received.

Problems viewed from both agency and student perspectives translate into problems for us as instructors. We do find ourselves expending energy helping students negotiate agency politics and sometimes advising them on ways to deal with somewhat irresponsible supervisors. We would much prefer to spend this time discussing the rhetorical challenges inherent in original project designs rather than those stemming from exacerbating issues. And while we feel comfortable as we grade most of the students' projects, the project described above, which shifted from analytical to descriptive in the student's hands, presented a real dilemma to us. Agency goals and academic goals do not always mesh, and in this case we were unable to foresee a misalignment. Finally, we also face the very real pitfall of having set up agency projects that require us to juggle instruction about several different genres in the classroom. And while we believe that all students learn something about the specificity of discipline-specific genres, an alternative approach is to have all students in the same section write in the same or a similar genre.

## **VII. Strengths of Our Design**

Despite these pitfalls, we believe that the three key concerns of our course design (collaborative project definition, student placement, and project development through a critical thinking approach) result in a powerful buy-in from all those concerned in the enterprise. First, the collaboration between instructor and agency to design useful and important projects encourages agencies to buy in to the concept of Service Learning. With this design, agencies receive a document that they can put to immediate use securing monies, revising policy, or designing procedures. Indeed, one supervisor commented on the end-of-term evaluation form:

In recent months, [our agency] has been involved in a couple of projects with students at CU. None has been as successful as the service learning course. A



few reasons why we think this project worked when others didn't:

- Clear definition of class and expectations provided up front by instructors.
  - Agencies required to define what they want through project description.
  - Student able to select projects that interest them.
  - Instructors stay in touch with progress of project.
- We had an excellent student!

Second, the method of student placement encourages students to select a project that meets their personal and professional needs, as well as to serve an agency they find worthy. Students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills crucial to both their remaining academic careers and to their professional careers. More importantly, they experience firsthand that the two are not only compatible, but mutually dependent. The real issues represented by agency projects demand that students apply these skills if they are to successfully complete their projects. One student wrote, on the university-wide course evaluation, "...to actually complete ...the final project was a confidence builder and strong learning experience overall." Another said (this time on the internal evaluation), "writing in the community has enhanced my educational motivation because my work had an actual social purpose, rather than being confined to pure academia. It is much more enjoyable to work hard for a purpose in which you believe."

Finally, we as instructors benefit by this combination of agency and student satisfaction. As we help students develop their projects and watch as they help each other, we are confident that the projects are academically demanding and that they are providing important disciplinary experience—both of which will serve the students well over the long haul. These outcomes make this approach appealing to writing faculty. Moreover, since students cannot dismiss writing as extra-curricular when their projects place them in an agency whose demands link academic rigor with agency progress, faculty reap the benefits of seeing students seriously invested in their writing.

## VIII. Conclusion

By situating our own academic goals of developing the critical consciousnesses of students firmly in real-world, disciplinary contexts, our approach allows us to meet Zlotkowski's challenge of an "intellectual agenda" in service learning writing classes. This meeting between academy and professions gives service learning the academic respect that it deserves, encourages community involvement, and offers students new ways to think about education.

Careful course design assures a classroom experience that meets Zlotkowski's call for "specific disciplinary and interdisciplinary goals" (25). This course bridges academic and professional worlds because it requires students to write professional documents that merit academic currency. This two-pronged strategy should encourage the degree to which such courses are taken seriously because they develop the very basis by which the academy defines its own activity: disciplinary fluency coupled with cognitive sophistication. And, having a range of disciplines and student interests represented in the same classroom can enhance the connection between disciplinary fluency and cognitive sophistication. To be sure, such a range of disciplines demonstrates to students that critical thinking is necessarily discipline-specific—each project and field have their own content domain and their own appropriate strategies for problem solving. And students must learn and practice these. But students also use what they learn about problem solving in their own fields to help other students with projects-in-progress in other fields; thus as they find similarities and compare differences in agencies' structures and goals, they come to see that, in many cases, critical thinking strategies can be transferred from one arena to another. Disciplinary knowledge, too, does not always function in its own neat little category. Moreover, the breadth of the genres and class activities themselves—from resumes to proposals to business meetings to oral presentations—provides students with a space to pointedly discuss problem solving, rhetorical strategies, disciplinary content, and agency-specific concerns, all in the context of shared inquiry. Together, then, these approaches promote a Deweyan inquisitiveness in the context of an academic or professional field.

The course design that we discuss in this paper allows for another kind of critical thinking, too—one that allows the course to meet goals not only of academic rigor, but also of

self-reflection and contemplation of important social and political issues that Giroux and hooks urge us to consider. An interdisciplinary student population in the classroom forces discussion of issues that might not arise in courses whose service learning focuses on a particular topic. While discussion of such issues sacrifices depth to some extent, it forces students to recognize the many kinds of agencies, and the populations they serve, that make up and affect our communities. With this variety of institutions and populations comes a variety of class, race, and gender perspectives. When an individual student submits a written draft of her project for classroom review, other class members inevitably bring both their own views and the views of the agencies they represent to the discussion of that project. For example, in our classes, students are exposed to issues in human services agencies and to alternative education centers, to problems confronting the disabled community, and to the needs of museums, arts groups, and science research organizations. All these varied perspectives are brought to the table and students must rethink and revise their writing to account for these varied perspectives, a process which requires depth and breadth of thought.

A focus on academic currency, then, does not preclude community involvement, but invites it. While we would never contend that students who take this class go through an epiphany and vow to devote themselves to community service, we do believe that students learn more ways to think about both community involvement and their own academic or professional fields. The many different projects from very different agencies themselves demonstrate the breadth of community involvement available to college students. And, while our approach meets academic goals, it does not threaten to impose an ivory tower mode of thinking on participating agencies or on the communities served by those agencies. It instead asks students to view the agency from inside out, yet another important step in the development of their critical consciousness.

Thinking about community service in the context of discipline-specific writing and thinking in turn spurs students to think about educational issues. As we introduce the course to students at the beginning of the semester, we ask them to think about the service learning philosophy in the context of their own fields. Our resulting discussion juxtaposes the

students' different philosophies and raises interesting questions about the process of education. Is college's goal to prepare students for the workplace? To make them love learning? To prepare them to be thoughtful and active citizens? Most students admit that they have always assumed everyone agreed on this issue and were surprised to find that, in fact, one can have a personal educational philosophy. We consider this awareness, in itself, to be a worthwhile outcome of the class.

Moreover, our students' discussion of educational philosophies may offer some further answers to the issues Zlotkowski has raised. Perhaps service learning's failure to make an impact on the academy despite its wide acceptance may be simply because few students believe that college, their profession, or their life, is about civic responsibility. Instead, they often seem caught up in earning potential and skill level. Thus, service learning thrives in required courses like ours and in disciplines already firmly aligned with service. But its impact is small because it meets neither students' market-driven philosophy of education nor their "learning for the sake of learning" philosophy. We believe our course may be an exception because it appeals to those students interested in "credentializing" as well as to those interested in developing a critical habit of mind. Yet both types of students are forced to also see the other side—"credentializing" students cannot escape the critical thinking focus of the course and students interested in more abstract, critical thinking get a taste of doing work in a professional setting. Such an approach, we believe, should go a long way towards making service learning an integral and respected part of the academy.

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