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Editor's Introduction:

Assessing the Value of Experiential Learning in Community-Engaged Projects

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My experience organizing service-learning projects influences my understanding of the goals of a community-engaged project, which the *Conference on College Composition and Communication* defines as “scholarly, teaching, or community-development activities that involve collaborations between one or more academic institutions and one or more local, regional, national, or international community group(s) and contribute to the public good” (p. 2). I see the value of community-engaged projects informed by experiential learning theory. Experiential learning describes the new knowledges students nurture from their critical reflection on the relationship between hands-on learning experiences and course concepts and applications. Such projects aim to undermine passive, rote, and uncritical learning. Community-engaged projects also stress the importance of students cultivating a strong work ethic and maintaining a high-level of professionalism, particularly when students represent their respective colleges and universities at their service-learning sites.

I entered college as a first-generation student with a GED. I enrolled in a local junior college because I believed that I could do something positive with my life by earning a degree. I felt some isolationism at my college, primarily because it is a commuter campus. However, that sense of isolation also came from a feeling of being an outsider since I entered college with a GED instead of a “real” high school diploma. I have always felt ashamed. In hindsight, I believe a community-engaged project would have helped me feel more connected to my college and to the local community. I would have also had the opportunity to participate in a professionalization experience that emphasized the importance of critical, self-reflection on learning. Community-engaged projects can invite students who feel isolated or see themselves as outsiders to participate in learning experiences that engage them in problem posing and self-

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reflection about their learning. As the ability to self-reflect on learning is a higher order skill, it is essential to perseverance in college.

Well-conceptualized community-engaged projects not only “contribute to the public good” (p.2), but also enhance course learning outcomes. The latter provides students’ opportunity to reflect critically on their hands-on learning experiences, with the hope that experiential learning shapes knowledge in different terms than those of traditional schooling. It is this important approach that *Open Words* foregrounds.

I have had the opportunity to collaborate with nonprofit organizations on service-learning projects. For example, two of my former students served as informal mentors to community youth participating in the San Anto Cultural Arts’ (SACA) *El Placazo Community Newspaper* and Mentor Program. Located in the historically dominant Mexican American community of the Westside in San Antonio, Texas, the nonprofit organization seeks to “foster human + community development through community-based arts” (“Our Roots”). For National Poetry Month, my students held workshops on how to compose cinquain poems focusing on the themes of nature and sustainability. For the event, community youth employed the expressive genre of poetry within the Mexican oral tradition to encourage community dialogue about environmental sustainability (McDowell, Herrera Sobek, and Cortina 218).

In her service-learning journal, my student Naya describes the SACA’s mentoring influence on community youth, specifically its role in providing them access to informal mentors from diverse sociocultural backgrounds and experiences. Naya appears to be thinking about cultural identity as well as the role of cultural arts organizations, such as the SACA, have in creating mentorships, suggesting that she sees the service-learning project as a cultural experience. In the following passage, Naya underscores her investment when she highlights that she has “become part of a close knit community which regards highly the act of mentoring students and helping them become part of their own academic community.” It is through the cultural experience and how Naya views her role as a mentor that she becomes invested in helping community youth recognize that attending college can also be an option for them.

However, community-engaged projects, such as the one I described with SACA, may not create transformational learning experiences. While service-learning is considered a high impact practice in higher education (Kuh), it often fails in practice to produce transformational experiential learning, or the expected greater investment in cultivating students’ sustained relationships with their community partners. When students understand the methodology and the purpose of service-learning, they may be more prepared to collaborate with their community partners and work toward

achieving the objectives set for their service-learning projects, a first step toward investment.

The March 2017 issue of *Open Words* highlights community-engaged pedagogy informed by experiential learning theory. By so doing, this issue hopes to encourage conversations about the ways in which such pedagogy may help first-generation college students persist in college.

This issue opens with a polemic from **Victor Villanueva**, Regents Professor and Director of The Writing Program at Washington State University. In “Of Communities and Collectivities,” Villanueva points out the challenges of engaging in community work in a political economy and ideology that prioritizes individualism and competition. To address the problem of “universal othering,” Villanueva explores the relationship between subjectivity and community, highlighting how we are all part of the “decentered subjectivities of the collectives.” Drawing on the work of Brazilian sociologist José Maurício Domingues, Villanueva works through two central terms—“collective subjectivity” and “collective causality”—which in turn may help writing teachers deal with the double bind of working within and against an institution. This theory finds its way into Villanueva’s classroom by way of an anecdote, a retelling of how a student seeks not only to give voice to his Christian beliefs despite how they might be regarded, but also to demonstrate a deep understanding of those conflicts. For a polemic, Villanueva’s is a hopeful essay, particularly fitting for the contemporary challenges we face as writing teachers.

In “On the Cusp of Invisibility: Opportunities and Possibilities of Literacy Narratives Reflections,” **Romeo Garcia** proposes a literacy narrative assignment that encourages students to reflect on literate and rhetorical practices as part of a *geo and body politics of knowledge*. To help students think about the ways in which the interaction of time and space shapes and rhetorical practices, Garcia offers a literacy mapping exercise, an example of community-engaged project. Students may choose to engage in ethnographic research (ethnographic interview or participant observation) in order to produce a microanalysis of the interaction of time, space, and literate and rhetorical practices in three to four of their discourse communities. Garcia opens his article with a literacy narrative in which he reflects on how his grandma positioned him in “a history and memory of survival, preservation and resiliency” through their conversations and their walks. He explains, “She was showing me the paths ‘we’ve’ walked together all along. Grandma, entiendo, I continue to listen at to know and learn. I’ve learned to speak back for ‘we’ are always on the cusp of invisibility and silence.” Building on his literacy narrative, Romeo examines the potential of literacy narrative assignments to resist and reject invisibility and silence.

In “Your Voice is Your Weapon! Empowering Youth Through Community-Based Writing Workshops,” **Robin D. Johnson, Kimberly Reinhardt, and Sarah Rafael Garcia** discuss the potential of the Barrio Writers Workshop model, which employs experiential learning to help urban youth of color reflect on their cultural identities. This approach culminates in counternarratives written by those youth that talk back, resist, and undermine hierarchical, normative narratives imposed on them by the dominant culture. Johnson, Reinhardt, and Garcia conducted an ethnographic study focusing on youth participants in South Texas. In 2009, Sarah Rafael Garcia founded Barrio Writers, a nonprofit reading and writing program. Barrio Writers holds week-long, college-level, creative writing workshops in California and in Texas, collaborating with higher education institutions and with cultural arts organizations. Johnson, Reinhardt, and Garcia provide an illustration of a community-engaged project that seeks to contribute to the public good of a diverse population by helping youth participants counter the negative self-conceptions that they may have internalized *and* use their own voices as weapons for creating transformative social identities.

In “Constructed Spaces and Transitory Decor: Georhetorical Practices as Experiential Learning in Rhetoric and Composition,” **Chelsey Patterson** proposes a georhetorical pedagogy, drawing from the concepts of time, space, and experiential learning. Her pedagogical approach prompts students to analyze and evaluate the ways in which their identities are constructed within institutional settings, including classrooms, and within their larger communities. For example, Patterson’s activity, “Mapping the Classroom,” prompts students to interrogate the artificial space of the classroom that reinforces the power dynamics between students and the teacher, a representative of the institution. Students also reflect on how the artificial space of the classroom as seen in elements, such as traditional rows of desks, may also hinder meaningful collaboration with their peers and instead reinforce the ideology of competition in the classroom. The “Mapping the Classroom” is a geographically oriented activity that Patterson uses to help students reclaim the space of the classroom, a space in which they can take ownership over their writing and learning. She uses the activity to boost students’ self-confidence in their writing as well as their self-perceived abilities to critique their peers’ writing.

I have come a long way since earning my GED. I earned my Ph.D. from The University of Texas at San Antonio. In my dissertation, I analyzed the potential of community-engaged projects to create transformational experiential learning experiences, drawing from scholarship and from what I learned from coordinating a service-learning project with the San Anto Cultural Arts. I now teach writing courses

at Lone Star College-Kingwood. I believe that my personal educational experiences influenced my pedagogical choices, particularly when working with first-generation college students who are most in need of community-engaged pedagogy.

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About the Author

Kristina Gutierrez is an Associate Professor at Lone Star College-Kingwood, situated in a suburb of Houston. She received her Ph.D. in English from The University of Texas at San Antonio, where she specialized in rhetoric and composition and in Latin@ cultural studies. Her research interests include service-learning, visual rhetoric, and technical communication. Her book project thematically analyzes visual rhetoric in Latin@ communities, specifically visual rhetoric used in murals to document local histories and to advocate for social justice. She has presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, National Council of Teachers of English, Rhetoric Society of America, and the IEEE ProComm-International Professional Communication Conference. In the IEEE ProComm 2016 conference proceedings, she co-published, “How Do Voice to Text Apps Change the Act of Writing? Research on the Effects of Voice to Text Applications When Used as Part of the Writing Process” with Susan Garza and Frances Johnson. She had also taught full time at Texas A&M University at College Station and Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Since moving to Kingwood, she has become a member of the nonprofit organization Houston Arts Alliance because of her interest in popular art, including murals.

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