

The Author

Zachary Knapp is a senior at California State University, Monterey Bay. He writes:

Two years ago, I took a community-based service-learning course (required at CSUMB) that connected me with the Rural Development Center (RDC), a local small farm education program. The RDC teaches Spanish-speaking individuals and families how to start and manage their own organic farming businesses. It's an incredible empowerment program here in the Salinas Valley where Spanish-speaking farm workers compose a large part of the population. My service at the RDC has ranged from field work with student farmers to a liaison between farmers and their English-speaking customers.

The service assignment evolved into my senior research project on organic farming and more involvement with RDC farmers. My close relationship and work with the farmers constantly raises issues of power, privilege, economics, culture, and language barriers.

"Terreno" reflects these issues. I started the story in an introductory creative writing class titled "Writers as Witness" taught by Frances Payne Adler. The class centered around social action writing, using words to "break silences" about our world and what we see. In this way social activism and creative writing become one and the same—where the student practices a genre in a context of social consciousness.

Service-Learning at a Glance

Linda Adler-Kassner

Editors' Note: This article originally appeared in COLLEGE CYBERBRIEF, an electronic newsletter sent to members of the Colelge Section of TEACH2000. Reprinted with permission of the National Council of Teachers of English. The list of electronic resources appeared in Adler-Kassner's CyberBrief; we've updated the list a bit and added some print materials.

In the last ten years, projects designated as "service-learning" experiences have become enormously popular. Unfortunately, that popularity has also led to a certain amount of confusion about what service-learning is.

Service-learning is different from "community service." At its core, it involves linking the subject of a class with work in a nonprofit community organization and reflecting on that experience in some structured way (in journals or essays, for example). Service-learning can be a terrific strategy for helping students realize the power of language, gain broad experience with a variety of genres, and better understand themselves as parts of larger communities. To facilitate this, it's important to plan carefully and be prepared to learn along with your students.

Look before you leap into service-learning. It's important to be clear—for yourself, for the agencies with whom you work, for your students and possibly for your institution—about why you want to incorporate it into your course. Ask yourself: "What do I want students to get out of my course? What activities will help them get it? Where does service-learning fit in?" Wanting to help students become good citizens is a great start—but what's the connection between that and becoming a good writer (however you define that)? The kind of service-learning experience you incorporate in your course should be closely tied to what you want students to get out of it.

Service-learning courses come in all shapes and sizes. Service-learning doesn't have to be at the center of all of your assignments (it can be the focus of even one or two), and you can approach it from

various perspectives. Tom Deans has identified three models for service-learning that are most frequently used in composition courses:

1) Writing *for* community. Community-related work here involves students' writing documents for nonprofit agencies as a part of their work in the course. For the agencies, students might write brochures, grant proposals, articles for newspapers, newsletters, or other material circulating within the agency or to a wider audience.

2) Writing *about* community. In this model, students examine experiences working with or for community organizations in papers they write for class. Typically, this model involves students working with literacy issues in a community organization: as literacy tutors, mentors, or guides. However, agency work need not be limited to literacy-related opportunities.

3) Writing *with* community. Here, students work with community members to identify issues that community members want to work on. Together, they decide how to approach the issue and what kind of document(s) to produce to address the issue. Within this model, students are able to reflect on elements included in writing for and writing about community.

Whether adapting an existing model or creating a mix, the instructor of a service-learning course must be particularly thoughtful and deliberate about the relationship between course goals and service activities. By way of example, consider three conceptual approaches to composition instruction. First, there's the "discourse community" model—the idea that composition instruction should help students to build bridges between their own discourses and academic discourses. This is a "skills-

focused” approach to composition: The emphasis is on helping students understand skills associated with particular discourses and master the skills necessary to fit into existing communities. Writing *for* community, which has students producing different genres of writing (and, perhaps, thinking about similarities/differences between them) might work well here. Alternatively, some instructors use a “contact zone” model, seeing their classrooms as “safe spaces” where different discourses/experiences can be confronted. Here, writing *with* community, a model that could provide opportunity for students to experience and consider contact zones outside of the classroom, might be a better fit. Finally, some instructors think of their classroom as “dialogic”—they want to help students enter into a dialogue with conventions of various kinds of discourses, both inside and outside of the academy. Here, writing *with* community might provide a place to extend their dialogues and reflect on them. As you adapt existing service-learning models, it is important

to keep straight what you want to happen in your class and to consider how your service-learning project is helping to achieve that.

More and more campuses are requiring that students participate in service-learning courses to graduate, and composition can prove an ideal curricular home for these experiences. Service-learning takes careful conceptualizing, planning, and execution to be successful, but the results are well worth the extra effort.

The Author

*Linda Adler-Kassner is currently teaching an advanced composition course that incorporates service-learning at University of Michigan-Dearborn. Her research focuses on investigating connections between local contexts and literacy. She is writing a book, **Listening to Learn: Basic Writing and Basic Writers in the Contemporary Academy**, with Susanmarie Harrington.*

Recommended Sources on Community-Based Writing

Electronic Texts

Writing for Community

Adler-Kassner, Linda. “Digging a Groundwork for Writing: Underprepared Students and Community Service Courses.” *College Composition and Communication* 46.4 (Dec. 1995): 552-56. [Available at <<http://www.ncte.org/threshold/ccc/1995/3c4602di.html>>]

Arca, Rosemary. “Systems Thinking, Symbiosis, and Service: The Road to Authority for Basic Writers.” *Writing the Community*. Ed. Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters, 1997. [Available at <<http://www.ncte.org/threshold/books/59168/ch11.html>>]

Bacon, Nora. “Community Service Writing: Problems, Challenges, Questions.” *Writing the Community*. Ed. Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters, 1997. [Available at <<http://www.ncte.org/threshold/books59168ch05.html>>]

Writing about Community

Herzberg, Bruce. “Community Service and Critical Teaching.” *College Composition and Communication* . 45.3 (Oct. 1994): 307-19.

[Available at <<http://www.ncte.org/threshold/ccc/1994/3c4503co.html>>]

Schutz, Aaron, and Anne Ruggles Gere. Service-Learning and English Studies: Rethinking “Public” Service.” *College English* 60.2 (Feb. 1998): 129-49.

[Available at <<http://www.ncte.org/threshold/ce/1998/ce6002se.html>>]

Writing with Community

Cushman, Ellen. “The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change.” *College Composition and Communication* 47.1 (Feb. 1996): 7-28.

[Available at <<http://www.ncte.org/threshold/ccc/1996/3c4701rh.html>>]

Flower, Linda. “Partners in Inquiry: A Logic for Community Outreach.” *Writing the Community*. Ed. Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters, 1997.

[Available at <<http://www.ncte.org/threshold/books/59168/ch09.html>>]

Peck, Wayne Campbell, Flower, Linda, & Higgins, Lorraine. “Community Literacy.” *College Composition and Communication* 46.2 (May 1995): 199-222. [Available at <<http://www.ncte.org/threshold/ccc/1995/3c4602co.html>>]