Innovative Approaches to Teaching Technical Communication

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Tensions among research, teaching, and service are real, and they are unproductive when they limit the type of work valued by the university (see Sosnoski 1994). There have been some notable attempts to rethink the work of the university and establish new ways to value a range of faculty initiatives that don’t fit into the hierarchy of research, teaching, and service (for example, Boyer 1997). One of the more interesting attempts is the 1996 report by the MLA Commission on Professional Service, which takes as one of its starting places the imbalance among research, teaching, and service. The commission notes that service in particular is almost completely ignored or seen as an activity lacking “substantive idea content and significance” (171). There is nothing new either in the university’s hierarchy of values or in the denigration of service. Yet this taxonomy of faculty work should be disconcerting to those of us who believe that a university must have long-term commitments to serve the community in which it is situated. But perhaps more problematic is the view of service as an intellectual wasteland.

My most general concern in this chapter is this view of service as lacking substance and significance. (I will focus, however, on community service learning rather than departmental or university service.) To be sure, the MLA Commission on Professional Service offers an intriguing rearticulation of research, teaching, and service into “intellectual work” and “academic and professional citizenship,” with research, teaching, and service recast as sites of activity that can be found in both categories. I am interested in a tighter refiguring of these sites of activity for two reasons. The first is more general and is based on an argument that “service” is actually an epistemologically productive site of activity. It is this issue that serves as a framework for the chapter. My second reason for
working toward a tighter configuration of research, teaching, and service comes specifically from the strengths, purposes, and applications of technical and professional writing. This discipline, perhaps more so than others, is immediately relevant to communities around a given university, is a powerful place from which to serve those communities, and is a discipline that will grow in sophistication from work outside the university. What I have described in these last few sentences is not “mere” service but also combines teaching, program design, and research into a matrix of interests and activities. My argument is this: An approach to technical and professional writing that works toward a rearticulation of research, teaching, and service is a powerful way to do academic work and can positively alter the meaning and value of technical and professional writing itself as a site of activity.

**TECHNICAL AND PROFESSIONAL WRITING, SERVICE LEARNING, AND PROGRAM DESIGN**

If my experiences at conferences such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the Association for Teachers of Technical Writing, and the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication are any indication, service learning is increasingly common. But why? In a sense, service-learning projects are an extension of technical writing pedagogies that have been in place for some time. The use of cases in writing courses, for example, is commonplace despite the feeling of some that the fictive scenarios provide inadequate audience constructs (for example, Artemeva, Logie, and St-Martin 1999). For many, including those whom I worked with at Georgia State University, cases provide a rich context for learning about writing, organizations, and other complex relations associated with writing (such as politics and ethics), and so we have written cases for a number of writing courses. Technical writing teachers have long used writing projects in which students work on solving problems for real clients, or what Huckin (1997) calls “community writing projects” (see the first few pages of Huckin’s article for a sense of the number of programs that employed such pedagogical practices in the late 1990s). Yet, at the time Huckin wrote his article on technical writing and community service, he knew of no technical writing programs that employed service learning. That situation has certainly changed, and there are two reasons for this, I think: service learning has caught fire across the university within the
last ten years, and technical and professional writing programs have been well positioned to embrace and enhance the pedagogy. Because of the focus on complex problems and real clients, then, service learning is in many ways a natural extension of pedagogies common in technical and professional writing classes.

My concern in this chapter isn’t primarily with service learning, but rather with programmatic connections to service learning. Still, service-learning teaching is at the core of the changed practices I’m arguing for here, and so I begin with my approach to service learning. Like Huckin (1997), who articulated his goals for service learning in technical writing as (1) helping students develop writing skills, (2) helping students develop civic awareness, and (3) helping the larger community by helping area nonprofits, my goals for service learning are to take part in long-term community change by meeting the needs of community partners and to provide rich and compelling contexts for student learning. These goals are actually quite complicated in how they play out. In fact, they bleed into all aspects of our writing program and my work at Georgia State.

Setting up service-learning projects takes some time. The ultimate goal is to make service-learning programmatic (more on this later), but currently I am the only faculty member who consistently teaches courses with service-learning components. The process actually runs throughout the year. I have contacts at my university’s office of community service learning who occasionally funnel projects my way. I am sometimes asked by our AmeriCorps program to speak at training and information sessions with members of community-based nonprofits. These opportunities often result in new projects and relationships. And I have created a network of contacts in Atlanta, with whom I have been working for nearly four years now. These efforts are essential because through them I am trying to build long-term relationships with organizations in the community that make a difference in people’s lives; likewise, I am trying to make our professional and technical writing program an organization that also makes a difference in people’s lives.

Depending on my teaching and that of interested colleagues, I work with my contacts to come up with seven to fourteen projects each semester, which meet the following criteria:

- The projects meet a real need as articulated by our community partner
- The projects are sophisticated and writing related
- The projects fit into the course time frame (about ten weeks)
The heart of the criteria is that these projects must be of service to the people with whom we are working. When these criteria are met, I begin to address other constraints. Once potential projects are identified, I visit my contacts at their locations to learn about the organization, make sure the site and neighborhood are safe and accessible to students, and further discuss the contours of the project. If my contact person expresses the desire to proceed, I write a letter of understanding, which is based on my university’s standard intern contract. This letter is then rewritten by the contact person, if need be, and eventually is given to students as well (who can also add to the letter). Finally, the contact person is invited to class for the first day of the project to see the university, to see the space where students work and learn, and to meet with the group of students who will be working with them.

The students who participate in these projects are diverse in terms of age, race, class, and gender—“typical” students at Georgia State. Although the course serves students from across the university, the majority of students are juniors and seniors from the business school. Technical writing, on the other hand, isn’t a true service course. About half the students in technical writing enroll to fulfill requirements for majors other than English; the other half plan to be technical writers upon graduation. The diversity of student experience is useful for service-learning projects because not only do these students have a range of interests and expertise but many also work as professionals and so bring rich histories and skills to our classes.

My approach to service learning is somewhat different from the model typically presented in composition and some technical and professional writing forums. The difference is not really in the pragmatics of setting up or teaching a service-learning project; rather, it is in the institutional framework I am trying to create. Therefore, I am more interested in relationships between the writing program and community-based organizations than I am in student–community agency relationships. In composition studies in particular, the common service-learning model is to have students find projects to work on or to choose from a wide array of projects—usually more projects than can be addressed in a given semester. Student choice, student agency, student voice are valued and for good reason (see Bacon 1997). One goal of service learning is to educate for citizenship and to transform students’ understandings of and relationships with the world around them. But my concern with such an approach is that it too often sounds like a low-level colonization of the
I question, in other words, both the pragmatics and ethics of such an approach. I wonder if students can find appropriate projects with community organizations within the time frame allotted. But more importantly, my experience with nonprofits suggests that students continually coming to them looking for projects takes valuable time and tends to raise expectations that might not be met. These expectations can create situations that hurt rather than help university-community relationships. In other words, I have serious doubts about that ability of service learning to accomplish either its service or its learning goals without a solid institutional home. Communities can indeed be hurt if they are in fact burdened by responding to numerous students looking for projects, particularly if there is no solid commitment that the project will be completed. The primary goal, after all, is to help community-based organizations help their communities; it is to participate in community change. Yet, when the primary motivation and concern is student agency, student learning, and student growth, I think service learning runs a serious risk of doing harm.

To avoid harm (at the very least), service learning in technical and professional writing needs to be part of the writing program. And so let me outline here the theory of institutional design necessary for creating that home. First, meaningful service is connected to long-term and community-driven attempts at change. Students, by the very nature of their position, cannot make the long-term commitments necessary to participate in meaningful community change. Faculty and programs can and so should make themselves available to help communities; we shouldn’t be sending students into communities, like missionaries, to find problems. Second, ongoing processes of community and institutional building are integral to community change (see Kretzmann and McKnight 1993 for much more on community building and change). Writing teachers and students can participate in community building and change, but only to the extent that we move away from an individual service ethic, which I tend to equate with academic charity (individual classes and students serving others, for example), and toward a community-situated ethic that seeks sustainable change, which I tend to link to (community-defined) issues of justice. Writing programs are far more useful to communities than to individual students and faculty because they provide a context for meaningful student and faculty work. They can do so, however, only if they are designed with a community interface.
I am primarily interested in the relationship between community-based organizations and the writing program because such an institutional relationship is more powerful and potentially more transformative. Service learning must primarily benefit the community partners with whom we work—they must be given preference—and the best way to ensure that this preference happens is to develop meaningful, long-term relationships with them. These relationships must be institutional to be effective. They cannot depend on the charisma of individual students or the commitments of individual faculty members, although they almost always start that way.

At Georgia State, we are attempting to institutionalize service learning within the writing program. At the undergraduate level, we situate service-learning experiences in both technical and business writing classes. Although service learning has never been limited to these classes, they are concentrated within these curricular slots to ensure that students have the option of service-learning experiences during their time with us, an option we encourage. In a larger sense, then, relationships between the writing program and the community are part of the identity of the writing program. Such relationships affect not only what happens in the classroom but also the kinds of experiences we offer students, the types of classes we offer (and will offer), and ultimately, the work we do as a faculty and a program. Service and community involvement, then, flow into other categories of work, and each site of activity—service, teaching, and research—is potentially transformed. In the next section, I will use two service-learning projects to demonstrate this possibility.

REFIGURING RESEARCH, TEACHING, AND SERVICE

The two cases I discuss in this section began with relationships connected to my service-learning efforts. Each case shows how “service” activities can have intellectual substance; how “teaching” can both serve and foster research; and how “research” can serve and instruct.

The first case concerns my involvement with rethinking public policy efforts associated with the local Ryan White Planning Council (see Grabill 2000 for a more complete discussion). The Planning Council is a federally created body that makes decisions with respect to HIV/AIDS care in Atlanta. Most urban areas have such councils. The Planning Council must be composed of individuals who fit a number of categories (everything from health care providers to government officials), and at
least 25 percent of the local Planning Council must be made up of individuals affected by the disease. In addition, the composition of that 25 percent must match the current demographics of the disease (which has become increasingly low-income, non-white females). The theory here is that those most affected by the disease ought to have a significant say in making policy about their care. However, meaningful client involvement isn’t easy. In fact, the feeling of many involved with the Atlanta Planning Council is that meaningful client involvement hasn’t been achieved: the council hears from too few clients, who represent a rather narrow range of those affected by the disease.

I became involved with the project to address problems of client involvement through a student’s service-learning project in one of my technical writing classes. The project in question was completed with Kuhrram (Ko) Hassan, an adolescent-HIV/AIDS educator, who worked for one of the service providers funded by Ryan White legislation. Ko was concerned with generating and documenting client involvement at his agency, which became the focus of the student project. For part of a semester, the student worked with Ko to understand his position, the policies and procedures of the organization, and ways in which he and others at the organization interacted with clients. The student’s goal was to create with Ko and others a process by which involvement with clients could be easily facilitated, recorded, and then written about and shared with others. She (the student) produced a short procedures “manual” (a process-flow chart, really), some job descriptions relevant to this process, and a formal report documenting her research and arguing for her work (a “product” and a report are typical of the deliverables for projects like this).

The student project was complicated, and in many respects, the student never finished it (although she did well within the context of the course). During the course of the student project, however, Ko and I began to discuss the larger problem of client involvement that was affecting the Planning Council’s policy functions. Our conversations eventually evolved into a research project with two interconnected goals: (1) to improve client involvement in policy making by creating with clients procedures that overcame current barriers and (2) to create documentation of client involvement for use in policy discussions and reports of compliance to the government. So I was invited to help address a problem, and this invitation was framed as research, which was important for the
Planning Council because it gave credibility to voices too easily dismissed as isolated, to evidence from clients too easily ignored as anecdotal, and to client concerns too often dismissed as complaints. For obvious reasons, framing my involvement as research was important to me as well. The time I devoted to this project was significant, and to frame it as “service” or even “teaching” within an institution that still maintains a hierarchy of research, teaching, and service was unwise. More to the point, however, the work I did with the Planning Council was research. But it was also a service to that organization and to the people with whom I worked, and initially it was an explicit part of my teaching.

The Planning Council project is important for other reasons as well. Because the project was one of my first service-learning experiences, what I learned changed how I teach technical and professional writing classes. I began to look for technical and professional writing practices in community-based contexts. I began to more fully understand the role of writing and research in public policy processes. And I began to rethink the common ways in which technical and professional writing identified itself as a discipline. For example, I have started to think about what might happen to technical and professional writing if we fully embraced civically focused, nonacademic writing and writing in noncorporate and governmental organizations as a critical concern. Certainly, the kinds of questions we would seek to answer in response to these different contexts would change. We would also teach different sorts of writing to a new group of students and collaborate with units within the university we don’t currently work with—public health, city planning, and public policy programs, for example. Our writing program designs would similarly change. Service outside the university has been fertile intellectual ground for me because it has forced me to rethink the identity and social value of technical and professional writing both at Georgia State and within the discipline at large.

The second case concerns work that is ongoing. As part of the regular conversations I have with community-based organizations, I became involved with the United Way, who wanted to list our writing program as a “technical support resource” for their grant programs. Through these programs, the United Way funds grassroots organizations that form to solve specific problems in neighborhoods throughout Atlanta. We have worked with a couple of organizations funded by United Way grant programs.

In 1998, I was appointed to an ad hoc United Way committee investigating the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technologies to
provide data-based maps of neighborhoods and communities to be used by the United Way and other organizations for decision-making regarding needs and services. Students were to provide research and writing expertise to this project. Although that project was soon shelved, I developed a working relationship with Patrick Burke of The Atlanta Project’s Office of Data and Policy Analysis, the group supplying the GIS and planning expertise. We agreed that some kind of Web-based interactive database would indeed be a useful tool to neighborhood and other community-based organizations. Such a tool could help them participate more effectively in planning decision-making processes that demanded information and analysis that was tough to acquire (see Sawicki and Craig 1996 for one version of the theory driving this effort).

Work on this project still continues. Our goal is to design with stakeholders from community and neighborhood organizations a Web-based queryable database that returns data in the form of maps. The tough part, of course, is designing it in such a way that it is usable by people with varying experience and literacy levels. In addition, our initial feedback suggests that this tool will be even more useful if it serves more communicative functions—if, for example, it contains spaces for exchanging ideas and spaces for matching people with people and people with resources. For me, this database is a major research project. But it has also become a regular part of my teaching and, through my teaching, a service to some communities.

Early in the project, when Patrick Burke and I were just exploring possibilities, a group of students helped me with research related to access to computers in the city of Atlanta. Our focus was on libraries and other centers that allowed free public access to computers and computer networks. For a Web-based database to work for people associated with grassroots and community organizations, there must be infrastructural access and a host of literacy-related accesses. The student project was focused on mapping infrastructural access in certain neighborhoods and gauging the literacy support (such as documentation) that would be necessary to use Web-based tools. What the students discovered was depressing at best, and it was an eye-opening experience for them, both in terms of the uneven distribution of information technology and in terms of how such inequality deeply affects the project we were working on. Students began to understand that although it would have been easy to design these Web-based tools in a vacuum, such a resource would have failed.
Later, once we had developed a prototype of the Web site, another group of students took on the task of designing the usability research necessary to write the online help, and one of these students, during a later independent study course, took on the task of writing an initial version of the help system. Like the first group of students, this group was forced to confront the complexity of a “real” project; their experiences were both frustrating and exciting. The richness of these contexts for instructional purposes cannot be overstated. The teaching benefits are substantial because they place students in complicated writing contexts and ask them to deploy many of their intellectual skills as writers toward developing a solution. Students also get an opportunity to work closely with faculty on research. This work is not only a relatively rare opportunity but also an intellectually meaningful one. Students don’t often get to see what we do, and this observation strikes me as an important part of their education. At the same time, students are given an opportunity to understand aspects of their community and participate in community service. I highlight this project because, like the public policy project, it is an example of how service engagements are productive; and furthermore, it is an example of how students can participate in faculty research, thereby enhancing instruction.

I hope these projects have provided a deeper understanding of the transformative possibilities of service learning, but, more importantly, I hope they illustrate how a tight integration of research, teaching, and service begins to blur distinctions among these three areas, infuses each site of activity with shared energy and actions, and makes the work of students and faculty in technical and professional writing more meaningful and, in my mind, potentially one of the most radical sites of activity in the university.

**IMPLICATIONS AND NEW DIRECTIONS**

My suggestions for rethinking research, teaching, and service begin pragmatically with service learning. The process of service-learning design that I urge others to consider looks something like this model:

1. Develop relationships with others inside and outside the university who are supportive of service learning, who want to participate in service learning, and who are willing to assist in the development of service learning in technical and professional writing.

2. Work to integrate service-learning experiences into the writing program.

3. Begin slowly and small with a few service-learning partners and one
writing class; make sure beforehand that the projects serve the needs of the partner, are curricularly appropriate, and can be completed within a term’s timeline.

4. Frame the service-learning projects appropriately in the classroom by showing how such work is meaningful for writing instruction and how service-learning experiences are one way to achieve the larger goals of the university. (Students, in my experience, need to be persuaded to take risks. Persuade them and then reward them for doing so.)

5. Follow up with students and service-learning partners to honestly gauge the student’s intellectual and service experiences (reflection) and the nature of the benefit to the partnering agency or organization.

6. Maintain relationships.

This process is one way to institutionalize service learning and increase the possibility that such experiences transform the work of the university. Over time, what counts as “curricularly appropriate” will likely change as views of writing change based on experiences with community organizations. In addition, research opportunities will abound. I see more interesting projects each year than I can possibly do. These opportunities can also filter into graduate programs and theses and dissertations. My point, again, is that embracing and then institutionalizing community involvement is one way to transform the work of university faculty in substantial ways. Research, teaching, and service, as I hope I’ve shown, tend to blend into one another to more fully become sites of activity where one can teach, serve, and research at the same time.

There are certainly limitations to the approach I have presented. It is time consuming, and project selection and management can be difficult. In addition, when projects don’t work well, it causes significant problems for students and community partners. And because the service elements focus on organizations (when we work with organizations that serve the homeless, for example, students may not work directly with the homeless), students don’t always see their work as service and don’t always reflect on their work in ways that are meaningful. In terms of the larger argument I have been making, it is also telling that I still feel the need to validate the time spent and the work accomplished in terms of my ability to generate research from community-based projects. Finally, my insistence that the more transformative aspects of refiguring research, teaching, and service depend on institutionalizing service learning places a burden on writing programs that some may see as too
significant. It remains to be seen whether we can handle the burdens here at Georgia State.

I see these problems as program design specifications, and I think the following specifications, which move beyond the more concrete service-learning suggestions at the beginning of this section, are more generally useful design heuristics:

• Service learning is unsustainable within and outside the university as an individual initiative; it does not respond well to community-driven needs and will exhaust individual faculty. Service learning must therefore be part of the writing program’s design and therefore integrated into the curriculum (but not just slotted into classes; it can and should transform how classes are taught), given administrative support, and rewarded as part of faculty work, perhaps much like the single course release given to most internship supervisors.

• Service learning must be seen as substantive and intellectually rich work and so must be visible and presented in these terms. Its meaningful presence in the writing program and curriculum is one type of visibility, as is its ability to generate research. Service must also be visible in other ways as well, such as a university Web presence in which those involved with service learning can describe its value to the community (through the use of project evaluations, letters of thanks, and project artifacts, for example). Like all good programs, technical and professional writing programs can and should argue for their social value. Service-oriented writing programs help.

Community based work in technical and professional writing allows technical and professional writing students and faculty to work across a number of contexts, with diverse audiences, and on projects of civic significance. I see technical and professional writing as a site of truly radical activity because of our ability to redefine the work of university faculty and students, because of our ability to move among the university, the corporation, and the community, and because of our ability to understand the powerful ways in which writing constructs institutional systems and changes them. We do work of “substantive idea content and significance,” and we do it across sites of activity long artificially separated. Continuing this work should be at the center of who we are as teachers, researchers, and citizens.