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Roundtable

Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition. By Thomas Deans. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 2000.

The Value and Role of Community-Writing Practices

Amy Goodburn

As I was in the midst of writing this review, a graduate teaching assistant (TA) came to my office to debrief after a conversation with our department chair. The TA was teaching an intermediate composition course with what she described as a "social activist" approach. Throughout the semester her students had examined relationships among power, language, and identity, writing about their own social locations and reading published texts by social activists. For their final projects these students had chosen to write collaboratively authored texts, such as editorials, letters, and brochures, that sought to "make a difference" in the university community. They were so enthusiastic about writing these texts, in fact, that they wanted to make them public by setting up display booths in the campus union. Because the union requires the endorsement either of departments or of student organizations for such booths, the TA had gone to the chair to describe her students' goals and to seek approval for their displays. She was upset when the chair not only denied her request but suggested that there was no connection between composition curriculum and social action and that the teacher was not doing her job.

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As coordinator of a writing program that runs over 250 sections of first- and second-year composition, I have faced different versions of this issue several times. Although in composition studies there have been calls for teachers to take up public engagement and to use their classrooms for it (Wells 1996; Mortensen 1998; Cushman 1999), the connections between writing and social action are not always self-evident. So I came to Thomas Deans's *Writing Partnerships* with several agendas. First, as a composition teacher who frequently uses service-learning in the classroom, I was looking for ways to address some of the pedagogical issues I have faced in having my students do community writing (such as assessing their work, documenting their learning, and negotiating the ethics of required community engagement). Second, as a writing program administrator, I was looking for a text that might help me respond to curricular and programmatic issues raised when teachers in my department use service-learning approaches. Finally, I was looking for a text that would provide me with arguments to use to persuade my colleagues that service-learning initiatives are not some fad in the university culture but are directly connected to intellectual work in English studies. While *Writing Partnerships* does not address all of these concerns, it does succeed, to varying degrees, in laying a foundation on which to raise pedagogical, theoretical, and institutional questions that composition teachers and administrators need to investigate further as they advocate and implement service-learning partnerships.

In *Writing Partnerships* Deans provides an overview and an analysis of the state of service-learning initiatives in composition studies. Because writing is a central hinge of such initiatives, Deans suggests that most of them are predicated on the belief that "students should learn to *write* themselves into the world through producing rhetorical documents that intervene materially in contexts beyond the academy" (8). He describes his own commitment to such initiatives as follows: "In my courses, I want to encourage versatile and reflective writers who not only learn strategies for negotiating the writing challenges of college but also venture beyond the classroom (and beyond academic discourse) to serve their communities by applying their still-emerging literacy skills to pressing social problems. Service-learning courses are, in my experience, one way—perhaps the best way—to encourage the development of capable and socially engaged writers" (52). Calling his research approach "comparative and contextualizing," Deans outlines five purposes for *Writing Partnerships*: to examine the theoretical assumptions underpinning community-writing initiatives; to categorize community-writing

practices; to relate current service-learning initiatives to contemporary scholarly discourses; to present case studies of community-writing programs; and to suggest how teachers and administrators might better design and support such programs (14). Each chapter takes up one of these purposes. In the three case studies, which constitute the bulk of the book, Deans focuses on individual teachers' goals and purposes for using community writing in their courses. He also includes two useful appendixes, one with materials from his own "Writing in College and Community" course and one with descriptions of community-writing courses and programs from other institutions. Deans uses his own teaching experiences with community writing to compare and contrast the sites he is studying and to elaborate on the issues that composition teachers face in achieving their goals.

One strength of *Writing Partnerships* is that it provides an overarching perspective on the current climate of community writing in composition studies. In chapter 1, "English Studies and Public Service," Deans begins by replacing the term *service-learning* with *community writing practices* as a means of conceptualizing and contextualizing what such initiatives mean in the composition classroom. Because they vary greatly across institutional contexts, Deans outlines three paradigms for community writing: writing *for* the community, writing *about* the community, and writing *with* the community. To distinguish these approaches from one another, he creates a taxonomy of questions (e.g., "What is the primary site for learning?" "What are the privileged literacies?" "What is the primary learning relationship?" and "What are the methods of assessment?" [17]) that teachers and administrators can use to conceptualize or analyze their own programs. This taxonomy illustrates how shifting our terminology can lead to new understandings about our goals and purposes for these initiatives.

After this comprehensive overview, chapter 2, "Service-Learning Writing Initiatives in Context," seeks to relate service-learning discourses to the scholarly discourses of composition studies, rhetorical theory, and critical theory. Deans examines the progressive education movement as represented by John Dewey and the critical pedagogy and literacy movement as represented by Paulo Freire to provide a theoretical grounding for service-learning goals. While this examination of how Freire and Dewey conceptualize and employ terms such as *critical consciousness*, *action-reflection*, and *democracy* is informative, the chapter might be more effective if the teachers in the three case studies articulated their service-learning goals with respect to Freire and Dewey. Moreover, Deans's analysis of theoretical connections between Dewey

and Freire does not go far toward delineating the connections between community writing and the intellectual terrain of English studies as a whole. Fortunately, Deans does an excellent job of describing the institutional contexts, teacher goals, and student experiences in the courses he studies.

In chapter 3, "Writing for the Community," Deans examines Laurie Gullion's "Writing in Sport Management" course, a writing-across-the-curriculum requirement for junior-year sport management students at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In this course Gullion emphasized a "writing for the community" approach in which students wrote documents, such as brochures, newsletters, and a grant proposal, for local nonprofit recreational organizations. Deans uses this course to discuss the rhetorical and cognitive challenges that Gullion's students faced with their agency projects, particularly with respect to audience, purpose, and assessment.

One of the most interesting insights that Deans draws from Gullion's course is that the impact on students of writing for nonacademic audiences is often motivational rather than rhetorical (69). While advocates of writing-for-the-community practices often articulate their goals in terms of helping students develop rhetorical awareness of audience, Deans found that the motivational reward was greater: "Students generally *feel* better about what they are doing and often articulate a renewed investment in their writing" in completing writing for the community projects (69). But if developing rhetorical awareness is the main rationale behind writing-for-the-community initiatives, is heightened motivation for writing enough? Does student writing (or do student writers) really improve in these contexts, or is the improvement mainly in the students' attitude toward writing instruction? Such questions are important for composition teachers to consider as they conceptualize curricula and rationale for community-writing projects. Deans also discusses assessment issues as central in writing-for-the-community programs. Because most documents that students in these programs produce depart from traditional academic norms, teachers are sometimes unprepared to evaluate them.

Curiously, Deans seems to criticize Gullion's course because her students focused on "the rhetorical and interpersonal aspects of their projects rather than larger questions of social justice" (78). The implied criticism appears to stem from Deans's desire to argue that writing-for courses differ from technical writing courses because "they focus exclusively on the non-profit sector (in contrast to the usual emphasis on business and industry) and raise social justice concerns (in addition to the on-the-job ethical issues addressed by most technical writing textbooks)" (62). Later Deans suggests that "writing-

for projects are generally the quickest to adapt to the dominant rhetorics and ideologies of the workplace" (76) and that, "rather than adopt cultural critique as the centerpiece of social action, writing-for courses generally prefer cooperation with established social service networks (non-profit agencies) as the most appropriate means of social action" (76). Despite his attempt to present various models for community writing, he seems unsatisfied by writing-for-the-community approaches that do not have the twin goals of "completing an agency project and fostering critical consciousness" in students (77). Moreover, he assumes, apparently, that students writing for non-profit agencies are unable to consider issues of agency and responsibility critically on their own. Yet when I taught a service-learning course about literacy, students who did "writing for the community" often explored the cognitive dissonance they experienced in using agency-based discourse in their writing. In creating a Web site for a local literacy council, for instance, one student wrote that he felt torn when using the council's "deficit discourse," because he thought that it perpetuated negative stereotypes about literacy learners. At the same time, he recognized the appeal of this discourse to the middle- and upper-class donors who kept the council afloat. While he ultimately decided to use the agency's discourse, he did not do so uncritically or unreflectively. Drawing on more student examples from Gullion's course might have altered Deans's opinion of students' critical faculties.

In chapters 4 and 5 Deans contrasts Bruce Herzberg's "writing-about-the-community" course at Bentley College with Linda Flower's "writing-with-the-community" course at Carnegie Mellon University and the Community Literacy Center (CLC) in Pittsburgh. In these chapters, Deans focuses on the types of discourse valued in community-writing projects like Herzberg's and Flower's and the audiences to whom they circulate. In particular, Deans compares the academic discourse valued in Herzberg's "Expository Writing I: Summary and Synthesis" course with the dialogic, hybrid discourse valued by Flower and other CLC staff in the texts that college students produce with the teens they mentor through the center and that they write for their "Community Literacy and Intercultural Interpretation" course.

Deans describes Herzberg's class as "designed not only to teach academic discourse but also to encourage new college students to critique dominant social institutions (particularly schools) and dominant attitudes (particularly the ubiquitous American faith in individualism and meritocracy)" (91). For this course students serve as tutors at a local elementary school and then read critical essays and write final research projects in which they examine the

social dimensions of literacy and schooling. Although Deans suggests that "writing-about practices are potentially the most disruptive of all service-learning approaches to broad patterns of cultural oppression" (108), he is critical of the ways that Herzberg values academic discourse in his course. For example, Deans describes an assignment, called "Going Public," in which Herzberg's students "imagine themselves as academic emissaries to the public" (101) by analyzing a public forum they could use to voice the concerns that their research projects raise. The students evaluate the rhetorical dimensions of this forum, considering issues of audience, evidence, and genre, as a means of considering how best to make their arguments in it. Deans notes that while this assignment "is well suited to raising important rhetorical concerns," it "remains largely an academic exercise rather than a purpose-driven rhetorical performance that moves readily into the public sphere" (102), because the students are not asked to deliver their arguments to public audiences. In contrast, Deans describes in glowing terms the hybrid discourses that Flower and other CLC staff value in their goal of fostering intercultural collaboration and inquiry: "They are essay-like but betray some of the conventions of the traditional humanistic essay: they work from experience toward theory, rather than apply theory to experience; they advance tentative claims rather than assert confident theses; they adopt report-like text features rather than aspire to a seamless elegance; and they value a diverse range of sources (especially observations on-site) rather than privilege only traditional 'authoritative' texts" (136–37). While the texts that Carnegie Mellon students produce with CLC teens are "delivered" via public performances called "community conversations," the hybrid texts that the college students produce in "Community Literacy and Intercultural Literacy" are not. Yet Deans suggests that although the inquiry projects are written for school, with Flower as the main audience, they "constitute another space for intercultural collaboration" (136). Like Flower, I frequently use inquiry projects in the classroom (indeed, a former student's project is profiled in Flower's *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing in College and Community* [1998]). But I found Deans's analysis a little troubling in the case study chapters, because it relies on commonplace binaries about discourse, such as "personal vs. analytical," "private vs. public," "academic vs. workplace," and "academic vs. hybrid," that many compositionists have worked hard to disrupt.

In some ways, these binaries seem central to the pedagogical rationales for community-writing practices. For instance, "if we define rhetoric as practical and purposeful discourse that gets things done in authentic social situations, then service-learning writing projects can be a vital complement to the

academic and expressive discourses generally included in writing courses" (73). I find such statements troubling, because they presuppose that "academic and expressive discourses" do not "[get] things done in authentic social situations." While Deans notes that "such binaries must ultimately yield to more complex and textured understandings of audience and discourse" (74), the arguments he and others make about the value of community-writing practices rely in part on one's establishing the composition classroom as a "private" space that does not promote writing in ways that are authentic and useful for students. Rather than argue for service-learning initiatives on the basis of such binaries, it may be more productive to frame them in terms of the different mixes of audiences and purposes that they offer students and teachers.

Another of the book's weaknesses is that the three case studies focus primarily on teachers' reflections rather than on students' experiences. Sometimes the relative silencing of student voices made me wish that Deans had provided more evidence in his analysis, particularly in his discussion of student performance and attitude in specific courses. When Deans describes the projects that Flower's students completed, for instance, readers are forced to rely on his unsupported judgment that the three projects he analyzed displayed "a complex interweaving of sources and discourses" (135). Composition teachers looking for ideas to incorporate into their own courses might be disappointed by the lack of student examples.

In chapter 6, "Prospects for Service-Learning in Composition," Deans argues that his own typology for community writing "helps curriculum planners to see the implications of their choices, and . . . helps instructors to align specific teaching practices with their chosen visions of literacy and social action" (145). This chapter is valuable for two reasons: it shows how Deans organizes his classroom to promote both writing-for- and writing-about-the-community practices (with assignments and two extended student examples), and it raises important questions for teachers and administrators who are interested in incorporating community-writing initiatives regarding their own institutional contexts. Deans's observation that service-learning advocates should heed the history of the writing-in-the-disciplines movement is particularly astute, because it suggests that the academic community's fragmentation and emphasis on intellectual work within disciplines make it difficult to institutionalize cross-disciplinary initiatives like service-learning in the long term.

Writing Partnerships also raises important questions about the viability of community-writing initiatives, given the material conditions that typically shape postsecondary writing instruction. While the teachers whom Deans

profiles are all faculty members, most composition classes are taught by graduate TAs and adjunct lecturers. How can community-writing programs gain a foothold in institutional structures when the teachers carrying out such work are marginalized? When Deans describes the task of contacting nonprofit agency directors and others to find suitable contacts for his students, I try to imagine the ethics of asking teachers in my own writing program to do the same. Graduate TAs are often inexperienced at teaching writing courses, new to the community in which they teach, and lacking in the expertise or time to do the groundwork that Deans describes. As my introductory anecdote suggests, even TAs who are interested in community-writing initiatives do not always have their institutions' backing. Although the TA in this anecdote eventually found a student organization to sponsor her students' booths, the department chair remained opposed to incorporating community-writing initiatives into composition courses. Addressing such resistance is a central concern for writing program administrators hoping to implement community-writing practices throughout their curricula.

Writing Partnerships is a useful resource for teachers and administrators already engaged in conceptualizing how community-writing initiatives might complement and transform their goals for writing classrooms. While it does not offer ready arguments in support of "commonsense" relationships between writing instruction and social action, Deans's book does provide fertile ground for future conversations about the value and role of community-writing practices in composition studies and in English departments more generally.