Anyone who has taught English Composition for any length of time knows how difficult it is to choose from among dozens of worthy “readers for writers.” Most of these anthologies for first year students focus on issues of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, the media, the family (in its many forms), education, work, and a wide variety of others that novice students can recognize, relate to, grapple with, and sometimes resist. These issues, all of which provide fuel for innumerable paper topics, require that students think critically about the idea of community—how they belong to and participate in various groups on a daily basis. No matter which of these readers a composition instructor chooses, however, chances are that the questions and writing prompts linked to its scholarly, journalistic, and literary selections will not ask students to deal with “community” beyond asking them to connect abstract ideas of the term itself with their own personal memories and experiences.

Those of us who teach English Composition through service-learning tend to see this kind of strict reliance on such abstract-personal connections in composition readers as problematic. We expect our students to use their intimate-yet-critical understanding of community to write for, about, and/or with living, breathing members of local communities. Most readers, if we choose to use them at all, must serve as only one component of our course materials; we typically use handouts, supplemental readings, and/or course packs to help our students make the leap between in-class academic discussion and their pragmatic involvement with real people, with real needs, in real time. As effective as these supplemental materials may be, I personally prefer to rely heavily on a good reader when I teach composition. This is why I was happy to find Marjorie Ford’s and Elizabeth Schave’s Community Matters: A Reader for Writers. Although its title and basic organization hardly stand out among the plethora of writing textbooks in publication at any given time, Community Matters is written and edited with the service-learning instructor and student firmly in mind.

One thing I particularly like about this book is how recognizable it is; this is essentially a standard composition reader that also directly incorporates materials necessary for teaching a service-learning writing course. Along with familiar reading selections from bell hooks, Maxine Hong Kingston, Tracy Kidder, and Tillie Olson, Community Matters includes plenty of checklists, questions, and guidelines for students participating in community projects of all kinds; examples of successful student writings—from reflective journal entries regarding service, to full-blown collaborative writing projects that serve local agencies; and, right alongside those more commonly anthologized pieces, the writings by and/or about community activists (some of which have been written specifically for Ford’s and Schave’s book), many of which will be new to instructors.

Another benefit to Community Matters’ recognizable format is that it easily could be used for a non-service-learning writing course. Besides including more typically anthologized authors, this book provides the student with preliminary chapters on critical reading; the fundamentals of planning, drafting, revising and editing; the art of writing a persuasive argument; and the nuances of doing secondary research. Another familiar feature of this book is its accompanying Web site, offering students and instructors a space for online discussions between class meetings, additional prompts for each chapter, plenty of links to other relevant Web sites, and even a chat room where students can share ideas and...
experiences with other students using *Community Matters* from around the country. There is plenty to say about these chapters and features, but this review will concentrate on what makes this reader a good choice for instructors dedicated to service-learning.

Given many composition instructors’ fierce independence when it comes to tailoring their classes to their pedagogical visions—an independence often strongest among those practicing service-learning—any given writing textbook will somehow disappoint any given instructor. *Community Matters* will be no exception. Being an adaptive bunch, however, those of us who teach college writing in conjunction with community service can take or leave what this book has to offer (and it offers much) as we see fit. One aspect of the book that will be most readily accessible to service-learning courses is its most distinctive feature. *Community Matters* is a reader that is unique in its dedication to the idea that community and community building should be experienced as well as studied. It is the new and refreshing voices of veteran community activists, adding a much needed perspective to the composition reader genre that most stand out and strengthen this textbook. This review therefore concentrates first, and most heavily, on these writings from outside academia.

The basis for determining any composition reader’s worthiness is how logically each reading chapter is organized. In their preface, Ford and Schave describe their own organizational strategy for readings and chapters as follows:

> Chapters 5-10 present the selected readings through a series of thematic topics: a sense of place, family, education, culture, work, and spirituality. Each chapter is divided into three sub-sections. The first group of readings focuses on tradition; the second introduce current issues, while the third grouping features community action projects that have had a significant impact on improving the quality of community life. (pp. xvii-xviii)

Discussions of traditions and current issues are certainly not difficult to find in today’s readers, but discussions of how everyday citizens can and do make significant changes on the local, national, and global levels are as welcome as they are unfamiliar to this genre. A good example of activist writing in *Community Matters* is Claudia Barker’s “How to ‘Ya/Ya’ in Your Neighborhood;” in Chapter 6, “Family.” Here, Barker examines how young urban students learn and grow through the trial-and-error, democratic process of an alternative family. YA/YA: Young Aspirations/Young Artists, Inc. is a New Orleans nonprofit arts organization, where Barker was director from 1990-1995. The article’s very title gives away its importance and potential usefulness for a service-learning writing course. It is not simply meant to offer ideas for discussion and writing opportunities, but to present service-learning students with a long-term case study of a successful neighborhood nonprofit organization that our students can learn from and talk about as they deal with their own service experiences. Barker gives a detailed, warts-and-all look at the problems and problem-solving strategies of such an organization. Drawing extensively from YA/YA students’ words, Barker concentrates on numerous important and familiar challenges. One such challenge is the insider/newcomer dichotomy that students working in the community may feel as they enter an established organization. Talking about how he felt when a new class of students joined the organization a year after its inception, one veteran YA/YA student, Carlos Neville says, “…I was just like, Who are they? I had never even learned y’all’s names for a whole year. We felt we owned it” (p. 250). This is not simply Barker’s inspirational brochure for YA/YA, nor is it strictly an academic study of YA/YA’s social significance or social message, even though it serves those purposes well. “How to ‘Ya/Ya’ in Your Neighborhood” goes further to discuss the tactical considerations of distrust, exclusion, inclusion, negotiation, compromise, uncertainty, disappointment, and victories (both minor and major) that accompany community service almost anywhere. Composition students can use *Community Matters* to discuss the larger issue of poverty in inner cities such as New Orleans and the ways organizations like YA/YA provide opportunities for artistically gifted students trapped in such conditions. As importantly, Ford’s and Schave’s readings give service-learning students material with which they can approach difficult questions unique to them. Students in a traditional classroom do not have to worry about Carlos’ sense of defensiveness and resentment, and would probably not need to discuss it; students doing community work, on the other hand, may very well recognize his reaction to “outsiders” because they themselves may have been on the receiving end of such emotion.

It is this attention to the big social issues and the pragmatic details of community service and community building that make such activist writings *Community Matters*’ most valuable aspect. Selections such as William Cleveland’s “The Social and Public Arts Resource Center,” for example, serve the dual purpose of educating students about complex issues like urban decay and homelessness, while implicitly urging students to think about adapting their service to meet the recipients’ needs, rather than getting caught up in a “good idea” for a
community project. Such adaptation is possible only by actively listening to the community itself. Cleveland profiles a public arts project led by muralist Judith F. Baca. Here, Baca and her team of artists carry out just such an adaptive maneuver after a veteran community activist tells them that painting a mural in Los Angeles’ Skid Row district would be a “silly waste of time,” because it wouldn’t provide food or shelter for the many homeless people there (p.154). What follows is a detailed description of how Baca and her team brainstormed the problem and came up with the idea to paint an alternative map of Los Angeles, making Skid Row’s services, shelters, and residents its center, rather than City Hall and other government buildings. Baca’s intention was to help people re-think the geo-political landscape of their city and neighborhoods, while at the same time helping poverty-stricken residents locate the resources they need.

Problem-solving is highlighted in these readings because it is an essential component of the service-learning experience. The readings are typically uncompromising in depicting the enormous obstacles community activists face every day. By the same token, these readings offer students profiles of people willing to face these obstacles. From Sister Elaine Roulet working with female prison inmates and their children in “Soul Sisters,” to Greg Watson leading a grassroots property acquisition project in Boston’s inner city in “The Wisdom That Builds Community,” to Kathy Torgersen and Carolyn Caddes working with Albanian refugees in the Balkans in “Bread Salt and Heart,” these readings cover a wide range of cultural issues, and the very specific and immediate problems each activist faces and moves closer to solving.

Ford and Schave make the activist readings’ implicit practicality explicit in Chapter 4: “Writing About the Community: Resources.” The first half of this chapter contains guidelines and worksheets designed to help service-learning students do things like keep effective reflection journals, manage collaborative writing projects, and think critically about the sites where they perform community work. Certainly, the resources cannot serve the many and unique needs of a particular composition course; however, they can and should serve as a framework for thinking about, and dealing with, the “nuts and bolts” of community service. Even those familiar with teaching service-learning composition courses will appreciate such basic yet essential advice this chapter offers to first year students, most of whom will not have had writing experiences outside of the classroom. In “Collaboration Guidelines,” for example, Ford and Schave suggest that when students first meet with their site contact person they:

Request models of documents similar to what you are writing that have already been produced by the agency. Studying these models will give you a good sense of what is expected of you and will help you shape your writing. (p. 80)

There is plenty of advice in this chapter that, for all its “common sense,” really comes from trials and errors over multiple semesters of service-learning instruction and writing. Moreover, these helpful hints can, if used as models from which instructors can develop their own techniques (even those sending their writing students out in to the “real world” for the first time), become a foundation for generating and developing far more resources than Chapter 4 provides.

The second half of Chapter 4 gives students examples of documents produced for four, very different community-based writing projects. These documents include a pamphlet introducing an ecological project in Palo Alto, a case study of a Methodist church in North Carolina, an editorial on political policy regarding adult education in Michigan, and a grant proposal for an Arizona parenting coalition. Obviously, these examples present a wide range of fodder for student discussions on service, critical reflection, collaboration, using technology, and composition skills. Furthermore, each example deals with social issues that students can talk about in class, and possibly explore locally.

What is missing in this collection, however, is context. Students and instructors alike may very well be curious about the histories behind each artifact. One might even ask students to apply a basic heuristic here by asking such key questions about the examples as: Why were these writing projects chosen in the first place? Who were the students behind the writing (i.e., what are their personal backgrounds and what effect, if any, did these backgrounds have on the choice and execution of these projects)? How did the students go about producing these documents? What kinds of challenges and set-backs did these writers face as they worked with their respective community groups and agencies? As is, Chapter 4 does not address these issues, leaving the examples to stand on their own. For this reason, there is a sizeable gap between the helpful guidelines in the first half of the chapter and the excellent writing examples in the second half. Service-learning students always need encouragement, and allowing them to read, in some detail, about how students such as themselves got through their own courses and produced these impressive pieces of writing would go a long way toward offering them just this kind of encouragement. There is a missed opportunity here,
which I hope future editions of *Community Matters* will address.

Trusting that there will indeed be future editions of this textbook, there are other changes I would like to see. First, and most importantly, this book strongly needs another preliminary chapter introducing students to rudimentary service-learning theories. In Part III of the instructor’s manual that accompanies *Community Matters*, Ford and Schave wisely provide journal articles and book chapters by such influential figures in the field as Robert Coles, Janet Eyler, and Nora Bacon to help instructors effectively place their pedagogical goals and strategies in a larger theoretical context. I would not necessarily suggest that these pieces themselves be included in a theory chapter for students; this is, after all, a reader for beginning writers. But there is room in this reader for a discussion of, for example, the crucial differences between writing for, about, and with the community (a reference to Thomas Deans’ *Writing Partnerships* would be helpful here). In this way, this reader’s practicality would be balanced and bolstered. This is a reader and not a rhetoric like Linda Flowers’ *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing in College and Community*, which devotes its entire second half to such issues as students’ responsibility to the community, intercultural literacy, multi-voiced inquiry, and community problem-solving dialogue. Yet, there is still room for a chapter in *Community Matters* that a cross-section of first year students can understand, will spark class discussions, direct journal entries, improve the quality of collaborative work, and help shape documents. While there is no substitute for quality education that strives for these same goals, a service-learning reader with at least one theory chapter would back up this kind of teaching, especially in a field so short on this kind of publication.

Getting down to the nitty-gritty of *Community Matters* (always with the intention of helping improve this vital and very welcome textbook), several instances seem to suggest that this first edition might have been rushed to press. There are a number of obvious errors throughout the book. The table of contents, for example, lists only three of the four writing examples in Chapter 4 (discussed above). More noticeably, the introductions to the readings and chapters are curiously inconsistent in their formatting. The introduction to Chapters 6, 7, and 9 give the activist readings special, highlighted and bulleted consideration, rightfully foregrounding these pieces; the introductions to Chapters 5, 8, and 10, on the other hand, don’t make this distinction. Naturally, a text designed to help students read and write with an eye for detail needs to be held to the highest editorial standards. I look forward to reading a more polished second edition.

Veterans of, and newcomers to, service-learning will find Marjorie Ford’s and Elizabeth Schave’s *Community Matters: A Reader for Writers* a refreshing addition to the ever-expanding list of readers available to them. This textbook will fit nicely into most writing courses that require students to do any level of community service. Yes, there is room for improvement here, but more importantly, the very presence of this kind of book in a field that needs it so much clearly indicates that the time is ripe for an exciting new sub-genre of the composition reader. *Community Matters*, I hope, is just the first of many more to come.

References


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