One of the most formidable challenges of teaching a service-learning composition course is the choice of textbooks. A wide selection of general readers deal with such issues as community, literacy, political action, etc., and there are new readers that offer students essays and articles on service-learning specifically (e.g., *Community Matters* by Marjorie Ford and Elizabeth Schave). As helpful and instructive as such readers are, they simply cannot serve as core textbooks for service-learning courses. More often than not, the foundation for service-learning courses must be laid by combining a generic rhetoric, relevant reader (or our own collection of readings related to community service), writer’s handbook, and, most importantly, our own weaving of writing strategies and knowledge of service-learning practices.

Quite evidently, Thomas Deans, author of *Writing and Community Action: A Service-Learning Rhetoric with Readings*, has been doing just this kind of weaving for several years. His textbook offers composition instructors a comprehensive, tightly focused, and highly practical “packaging” of Deans’ experience with teaching composition through service-learning.

Beyond being useful as a service-learning textbook, *Writing and Community Action* is among the very best rhetoric I have read. As all of us who teach composition know, “audience awareness” is a key to composing well focused, goal-oriented writing. The strength of *Writing and Community Action* is the fact that its audience is so specific and therefore needs very specific guidance. This book does not read like a one-size-fits-all text that can accommodate any number of approaches to teaching composition. Deans, instead, brings together a carefully designed collection of writing strategies, journaling activities, readings, student writing samples, and review questions/prompts that help guide the student toward fulfilling well developed and effective writing assignments. And while this kind of bold specificity (so uncommon for rhetoric out there today) could be interpreted as limiting to some, I believe this textbook allows Deans—whose breakthrough study, *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*, has established his as a major voice in the field—to share a rich set of teaching experiences with both students and instructors. In this book, Deans presents an outstanding model for designing a composition service-learning course—one that can pave a secure path for the first time service-learning instructor, or reinforce already established practices for veteran service-learning practitioners. Instructors on either end of the spectrum will find Deans’ pragmatic advice to students useful and ethically sound. Moreover, Deans is aware that his audience is comprised of generally above-average, self-placed writing students who are as invested academically as they are socially; he is therefore not shy about including challenging readings and assignments in his book. He seems by no means interested in getting students to write papers that merely supplement their work in the community with generalized reflections on vague notions of “community.” *Writing and Community Action* demands instead that students do first-rate academic research and generate documents adhering to high academic standards.

On examining a copy of *Writing and Community Action* (and I strongly recommend that anyone who teaches composition should do so), the instructor will find that whether covering standard writing issues/assignments (e.g., chapter 2: “Writing Your Life”), or ones unique to the service-learning course (e.g., chapter 6: “Preparing for Outreach:...”

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**Review Essay**

Scott Melanson  
*Greenfield Community College*

*Writing and Community Action: A Service-Learning Rhetoric with Readings*

Thomas Deans  
Respect and Reciprocity”), Deans’ focus is clear: making academic writing immediately relevant and useful to the student’s local community.

This blending of the traditional and service-learning approaches to teaching composition is first delineated in chapter 1: “Writing and Social Action.” Here, Deans brings together discussions of individual writing habits, the essay as a genre, and the concept of service-learning. The centerpiece of this chapter, and a keynote for the book as a whole, is the list called “Personal and Social Uses for Writing.” The emphasis here is on writing uses: from this first chapter on, Deans makes certain that students see their writing as doing something—immediately and for a real audience with real needs. The list is divided into two parallel columns, one delineating the “Use/Action” of a written text, the other offering a set of examples for each use or action. This comprehensive list includes such writing genres as “Essays, editorials, personal journals, graffiti, oral histories, [and] literature” as examples of ways to “express ideas, emotions, [and] identity” (p. 3). The message here is that any and all writing, including and especially college writing (which too many students see as primarily a means of collecting three or four credits), has intrinsic value only if it speaks to and directly serves a living, breathing audience. The list introduces the concept that, as commonsensical as it may seem to the instructor, will probably be revolutionary to a student whose only experience with academic writing is high school. Again, this list serves as an implied thesis for this textbook, rather than as the kind of lip service one may find in much standard rhetoric. Like Paulo Freire and Sylvia Scribner. Furthermore, this textbook highlights such problems, holding them up to the kind of scrutiny that makes the service-learning experience such a rich resource for college writing assignments.

Writing and Community Action problematizes not only the service-learning experience, but also some of the key theoretical concepts and terminology that underlie the entire service-learning movement. In the special section called “What is Literacy?” Deans invites students to grapple with a term that defies strict definition. This section both helps prepare students for the kind of service later chapters will require, and places them in the middle of an ongoing academic dialogue, involving such authors as Paulo Freire and Sylvia Scribner. Furthermore, students will find in this section the intersection of theoretical (i.e., quintessentially academic) writing and local needs that service-learning can address.

Chapter 3: “Exploring Community” asks students to continue thinking academically about a seemingly simple idea. Here, Deans again shows his willingness to steer clear of anything resembling a shoehorning of even this crucial concept into a neat, one-dimensional, strictly positive category. Although “community” is the raison d’être for service-learning, this chapter requires that students look closely at the more troubling aspects of this slippery term. All of the readings in chapter 3, in fact, are grouped under the subtitle, “Community Tensions;” each of the authors, who include Tracy Kidder and de Tocqueville, question your Life” asks students to do much more than write about “moving” memories of doing community service. As in most chapters in this textbook, this chapter’s strength lies in the excellent collection of student sample writings and review questions that follow each chapter. Chapter 2 samples impress me primarily because they represent to the student both highs and lows of doing work with the community. For example, while student writer Pat McMurtray, in “Problem Child 3: My Version,” relates a success story about bonding with an emotionally troubled child, Emily Marten’s “Traveling Away from Everything Known” discusses her inner turmoil while doing what she sees as unethical missionary work in Mexico. As would any experienced service-learning instructor, Deans refuses to offer a model for a “good” service experience. What he does present to students in these and other readings are opportunities to look beyond their concrete memories and consider what the larger lessons of widely varied experiences can, in the act of critical reflection, teach them. Furthermore, these inquiries center on the relationship between themselves and those they serve. These relationships are nearly always, to one degree or another, problematic, and this textbook highlights such problems, holding them up to the kind of scrutiny that makes the service-learning experience such a rich resource for college writing assignments.

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and even deconstruct the term. Deans brings all of the readings, along with his incisive review questions, together at the end of the chapter as he guides students toward the actual writing process. The careful synthesis of readings, review questions, and writing assignment is a strength of this textbook throughout and helps students take another step along the way to doing full-fledged service-learning writing. One option for writing a paper on community asks students to carefully analyze an actual community with which they are familiar. This is an opportunity for students to do prep work before actually working with community members; the assignment reflects Deans’ concern that students carefully prepare (academically and personally) for service before going out into the field. First and foremost, he wants students to begin early in the semester to think, read, and write critically—service can only meet high scholastic and ethical standards if students first achieve a critical mindset.

Although effective and ethical service-learning practices outside of the classroom are plainly laid out and among the chief concerns in this composition rhetoric, it is the inculcation of scholastic reading and writing skills that takes center stage. Especially in chapters 4 and 5, Deans does an outstanding job of presenting the fundamentals of academic discourse to the reader. Even if an instructor were, for some reason, to use this book without implementing a service-learning requirement, it would still hold its own. Chapter 4: “Writing in Academic Communities” asks first-year students to survey the majors they intend to pursue and take a real plunge into serious scholarship. Here, students are invited to generate an empirical research report, complete with subcategories discussing their objective, methods, recommendations, etc. Deans, moreover, gives the novice scholar outstanding guidance through this rigorous writing assignment. I cannot recall reading a rhetoric that presents a first-year student with the opportunity to almost immediately take on this genre, but once again Deans shows that he knows his audience. He also indicates his desire for students who may very well actually working with community members; the assignment reflects Deans’ concern that students carefully prepare (academically and personally) for service before going out into the field. First and foremost, he wants students to begin early in the semester to think, read, and write critically—service can only meet high scholastic and ethical standards if students first achieve a critical mindset.

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tions covered in the first six chapters and guide students through a full-blown service-learning research project. In these three chapters, Deans divides research projects into the three distinct categories: writing about, writing for, and writing with the community (see Writing Partnerships for a more complete discussion of these approaches). Because the chapters leading up to these three key chapters provide such a firm academic/ethical foundation for students, each is free to concentrate on such standard research concerns as evaluating sources, conducting productive interviews, coordinating collaborative projects, designing documents and presentation, writing grant proposals, writing proposal letters, or compiling oral histories. In other words, every instructor who has assigned research projects in the past will find plenty of familiar material in these three chapters, yet will have no problem applying these traditional strategies to service-learning projects.

Composition instructors with wide ranging goals for service-learning research projects will find support from these chapters. Chapter 7 can help the instructor facilitate a more traditional, empirical research project, or proposal for a project (Deans offers the student an alternative to doing service work by allowing them to do background research on an organization that they, or others, may work with in the future). This chapter asks students to do secondary library and online research, as well as primary research in the community, in order to illuminate larger social issues.

Chapter 8: “Writing For the Community” is geared toward a more product oriented, document design project. Primary and/or secondary research may very well be part of such a project, but the focus here is on the kind of work a student would do in a technical/business writing course. Having taught technical writing using a service-learning approach myself, I would highly recommend using Writing and Community Action for such courses. Although some earlier chapters (e.g., 4 and 5) could be skipped in such cases, the book (along with a solid business/technical writing textbook) would be an immense help. Much of chapter 8, in fact, superbly distills materials and advice I have offered my own students, but from a service-learning perspective.

Chapter 9: “Writing With the Community” is, I believe, best suited for students (and instructors) especially comfortable with service-learning. The assignments in this chapter insist that students work very closely with their community partners to either generate a proposal letter (suggesting a solution to a real and current community problem), or compose an oral history of a community organization. To ask students (individually or in groups) to carry out such a collaboration and expect truly valuable outcomes, an instructor would need to have a good deal of confidence in the maturity and dedication of such students. Semesters, as we all know, are always too short, and for first-year students to establish and develop a working relationship with partners they meet only weeks before the project is due can be quite risky. Instructors should therefore carefully select the students who take on this chapter’s assignments.

Having expressed this caveat, I believe chapter 9 provides first-rate writing samples and practical advice for students. An example of the advice comes in the form of a “Writing to Discover” activity box on page 387, which prompts students to take on the roles of community “stakeholders,” representing various perspectives on a local concern. Students are to adopt multiple writing personae as they carry out a collective freewriting exercise in the classroom. In this way, they begin working with the perennial dilemma of negotiating clashing community voices, even if they are all trying to solve the same problem, and start turning this hurdle into a productive writing heuristic. The activity illustrates another of Writing as Community Action’s strengths: its well-thought-out exercises help students tackle writing issues that no generic rhetoric ever would.

Like a good piece of college writing, Writing and Community Action concludes with much more than just a wrap up of ideas and materials; chapter 10: “Final Reflections” gives students opportunities to look back on what they have written and done over the course of the semester. The chapter guides them through the process of building a writing portfolio and composing a capstone essay that reviews both the academic and personal growth she/he has undergone. Reflection being the backbone of any service-learning course, chapter 10 facilitates the kind of stock-taking that the individual first-year student, the class as a whole, and the instructor—and indeed the field of service-learning itself—need to do, and keep doing.

In Writing and Community Action: A Service-Learning Rhetoric with Readings, Thomas Deans has written a textbook that, I hope, will inspire more like it: textbooks that address the unique needs that writing students encounter while doing and writing about service. The challenges instructors face as they strive to give service-learning students the best learning tools possible will continue to make themselves known as more and more service-learning courses are designed and taught. As the movement and its challenges continue to grow, however, I believe more and more service-learning
rhetorics will be published, and I trust that Deans’ excellent model will set the (high) standard for this new genre of textbook.

References


Author

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