In response to the rise of cultural studies in rhetoric and composition over the past few decades, many English composition instructors, myself included, have widened the scope of their courses tremendously; specifically, we have broadened our course goals beyond simply preparing students to compose essays that effectively utilize academic discourse. Instead, we invite our students to hone their writing skills by engaging the larger, more complex world beyond the college campus, thereby 1) showing them the effect their own writing voices can have in the non-academic world, and 2) helping them sharpen the critical skills they will need to be responsible citizens. For this reason, in addition to addressing the more traditional writing concerns of organization, focus, style, grammar, etc., many of us work to heighten student awareness of multiple discourses, discourse communities, and literacies. We also encourage students to think critically about current social issues and concepts of social justice. Generally speaking, we hope to empower our students with the knowledge that linguistic communication is a force that extends beyond the academy, and that they can and should use this knowledge in an effective and positive way as they move out into the “real world.”

This move on the part of composition studies and we as composition instructors beyond a strict focus on academic discourse in writing courses — intellectually energizing as it often is for both ourselves and our students — begs the question, Can we really teach students to appreciate the importance of the non-academic writing skills and of the “real world” issues we ask them to write about, or to comprehend that the power of their own linguistic/critical skills extends beyond the college campus, from within the composition classroom exclusively?

Unfortunately, in spite of our best efforts to push students’ thinking beyond the college environment, they still, for the most part, achieve an awareness of social issues from texts we assign, basing their choice of rhetorical strategies on writing assignments we design. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that they (contrary to our constant pleas to do otherwise) write to a very specific audience: us. We, in other words, and the texts we put on our syllabi, are all too often the sole authorities on the issues we ask them to write about, and, typically, our courses (along with the grades and credits they contribute to their transcripts) are the one motivation for students to write.

My own composition sections are made up largely of first-year students from homogeneous suburban or rural communities; moreover, these students are, for the most part, fresh out of high school English classes where strict adherence to academic discourse is valued far more than their personal opinions or insights. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that these students, who have rarely, if ever, been asked to express their own ideas about such topics as racism, poverty, feminism, or gay rights, should look to me (personally, and as a provider of reading materials) as both the only source of information regarding these issues, and the only reader they need to take into consideration.

There is nothing inherently “wrong” with teaching cultural-studies-based composition courses in a traditional classroom setting; in fact, I have been quite pleased with the level of critical discussions and papers most of my students have produced over the years, and I have faith that a significant number of my students can and will use the critical skills they acquired in my courses to think, act, and communicate more responsibly in the non-academic world beyond college. I, however, like many of my colleagues, have noticed time and again the tendency by many such students to “spit back” in their class discussions and papers the politically correct views they think we want them to hold. There are also, in some cases, students who regard...
these social issues as reflective of our own personal agendas, to be taken seriously strictly for the purpose of passing our courses. For the first few years after adopting a cultural studies approach to teaching composition, I regarded such drawbacks as inevitable — simply the nature of the academic beast.

Three years ago, as a Lecturer at the University of Michigan, I discovered something that actually addressed my concerns about teaching composition: service-learning. In several of Michigan’s academic departments, including the English Department, some faculty members were directly incorporating students’ community service work into their curricula. With the help of some of these faculty members and a few very helpful program directors, I researched this small but growing movement currently making real inroads in higher education nation wide. I was, of course, particularly excited to read about composition courses that required students to work in soup kitchens, women’s shelters, AIDS clinics, inner city schools, etc., and to incorporate such experiences into their writing. I was elated. I felt as if I had discovered the “missing link” between cultural studies and composition: getting students out of the classroom and into the community as they grapple with the complex issues facing that community.

It was not long, however, before my elation was replaced with real concern about how to implement an effective service-learning component into my courses. In my preliminary research, I came across several models of composition courses that utilized service-learning, but I was not exactly sure where my own teaching method fit into the big picture. Beyond the sheer logistical questions of how to match my students with community service venues, how to fit their work into an already tight semester schedule, etc., I was also faced with a number of tough pedagogical questions. Should my students do writing for community agencies? Should they instead strictly reflect critically on the work they do? Should the type of service they do help direct the kinds of reflective papers they write, or should the topics they read about and discuss in class help them decide what kinds of service they do? What role, if any, would the community members they worked with (those running agencies, as well as those receiving the services) play in my teaching? Most importantly, would my own method of teaching, which I had been developing for more than seven years, survive its marriage with service-learning, or would it be transformed in some way?

A few months ago, my elation returned when I was asked to review Thomas Deans’ book, *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*. Taking nothing away from publications on service-learning and composition that precede it, *Writing Partnerships* stands apart in this very new field of research for two important reasons: 1) its placement of multiple models for combining composition and community service within a clearly delineated typology, and 2) its use of that typology to help composition instructors make key decisions about how to best use service-learning in their own courses. Deans, in other words, provides instructors like myself with a comprehensive and systematic look at a wide range of service-learning composition courses and projects from around the United States, allowing us to decide where our theory and pedagogy fits in (and, just as importantly, where it does not). Moreover, Deans uses this book to argue that service-learning is the next logical step in moving student thinking and writing beyond, while not entirely away from, academic discourse, and that it should therefore be embraced by composition theory (as well as English studies as a whole) in the same way that cultural studies was before it. Writes Deans: “If the general inclination of members of the discipline is to theorize about writing as a social act, then service-learning is one means by which to underscore and extend this commitment” (p. 9).

Any instructor, in any discipline, who adopts service-learning as part of her/his pedagogy, needs the support of quality research, as well as anecdotal evidence for service-learning’s efficacy as a teaching method; for this reason, those of us who have taken on the challenge of charting this new territory in composition studies for ourselves need both inspiration and practical advice. In fact, since Deans turns to such pedagogical theorists as John Dewey and Paulo Freire, two of the most prominent names in the service-learning movement as a whole, in laying out the framework of *Partnerships*, this book provides inspiration and advice for anyone who makes, or who wants to make, service a part of their teaching.

*Writing Partnerships* is broken down into six chapters. Besides laying out the book’s overall organization, the first chapter examines service-learning as a movement that is slowly gaining attention within English studies and considers why the attention is warranted and should continue. The second chapter briefly surveys the theoretical foundations of service-learning. Chapters three, four, and five look closely at several models of what Deans sees as the three basic approaches to teaching composition through service-learning: writing-for, writing-about, and writing-with the community. In the sixth chapter, the author discusses his own use of service-learning in teaching a composition course. He also uses this last chapter to speculate
on the future of service-learning in English studies, calling on readers to use his basic research model to pick up where he has left off. Finally, Deans provides three appendices of materials and information intended to help the reader establish (or continue to build) community-based writing courses of her/his own. These appendices include syllabi and sample student papers from Deans’s own service-learning course at Kansas State University; descriptions of community writing courses from around the country; and resources and contacts regarding service-learning.

Deans begins Chapter One, “English Studies and Public Service,” by calling on researchers/instructors in rhetoric and composition to not only embrace service-learning, but to also become leaders in the movement. The author legitimizes this call early in the chapter by emphasizing the common goals of service-learning and contemporary composition studies:

...pedagogical values now universally lauded in composition-active learning, student-centered learning, cooperative learning, life-long learning, cross-cultural understanding, critical thinking, authentic evaluation-are built into the very blood and bone of most community-based academic projects.” (p. 2)

Moreover, Deans specifically calls on those in rhetoric and composition to do qualitative research—to “...investigate community writing projects in context” (p. 5), as opposed to generating more quantitative reports that present empirical data supporting the benefits of service-learning. While the author fully acknowledges the need for quantitative research in helping establish this movement in higher education, he notes the general lack of studies that focus on “situated student writing or rhetorical competency” (p. 5).

Deans goes on, in this first chapter, to explain how this book, his own qualitative research project, situates several carefully selected community-based writing courses and programs within what he sees as the three paradigms of such pedagogical approaches: writing for the community, writing about the community, and writing with the community. The author’s intention in naming these paradigms is not to create a neat system for sorting and packaging them, but is rather to “examine,” “sort,” “relate,” and “balance” each of the three in order to: “...assert that service-learning writing initiatives deserve a place in the college English curriculum, and to suggest how teachers and administrators might thoughtfully design and support such courses and programs” (p. 14).

Before moving into a chapter-by-chapter comparison and contrast of these paradigms, Deans briefly outlines the major theories of community-based education that shape and fuel each of the three approaches. Although he covers a lot of ground in Chapter Two, “Service-Learning Writing Initiative in Context,” citing and referring to a wide array of contemporary figures in rhetoric and composition (e.g., Peter Elbow, Linda Flower, James Berlin, and Shirley Brice Heath), his primary focus here is on John Dewey and Paulo Freire.

Considered by many to be the most important theorist of community-based education, John Dewey, Deans points out, advocates the breaking down of self/society dualisms in education, and is “a philosopher of social action rather than of detached knowledge...” (p. 33). Dewey, a champion of the democratic ideals of communication, participation, and interaction between individuals throughout society, sees democracy as inseparable from the idea of community; therefore, he sees any form of education claiming to uphold democratic principles as necessarily part and parcel of the community within which it takes place.

Dewey’s strength as a service-learning theorist is his justification for getting students into the “real world” of action; he recognizes the importance of “...projects that draw on individual talents within collaborative efforts that intervene in social settings, whether classrooms or local communities” (p. 34). However, being a white, middle-class philosopher of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Dewey, Deans notes, does not entirely satisfy many contemporary practitioners of service-learning; in particular, those researching and teaching from a neo-Marxist perspective tend to find Dewey soft on the idea of getting students to critically question the systems of power that exist alongside even the best aspects of democracy. Dewey, according to such critics, wants to bolster what is good about democracy, without revolutionizing the injustices that come with it.

For those instructors who see service-learning as the opportunity to not only help students become involved with local communities, bringing to bear Dewey’s ideas of democratic participation, but to also invite students to think critically about deep-rooted systemic problems such communities face, Paulo Freire provides a more complete pedagogical theory. Deans points out that Freire, a neo-Marxist radical activist, shares Dewey’s conviction that education must advocate students’ direct involvement with real people and real problems beyond the classroom; however, Freire’s theory calls on educators to foster “critical consciousness” in students, to help them delve methodically into the power structures that affect such issues as race and
class, and to thereby, eventually, affect real changes to those structures. While Dewey and Freire share the same basic philosophy of education, their ideas of students’ immediate political responsibilities differ dramatically. “Whereas for Dewey education prepares and motivates participation in the polis, for Freire education is politics” (p. 41).

In the remainder of Writing Partnerships, Deans uses this interplay between Deweyan and Freirean approaches to service-learning as he lays out, compares, and critiques the three paradigms of teaching community-based writing.

Chapter Three, “Writing for the Community: ‘Real-World’ Writing, Nonacademic Literacies, and Writing in Sport Management,” takes a close look at the first of these three paradigms. Here, Deans discusses his research on courses that require students to work with, and produce written documents for, local nonprofit agencies. The chapter focuses primarily on Writing in Sport Management, a University of Massachusetts course taught by Laurie Gullion, which she designed for junior-year sport management students. Deans singles out this course (as it was taught in the spring of 1996) because he sees it as embodying the fundamental goals of the writing-for paradigm: “(1) composition scholarship on the movement between academic and workplace literacies, (2) articulations of the social perspective on nonacademic writing, and (3) research on audience” (pp. 55-56).

Gullion, who requires her students to work closely with nonprofit recreational organizations in the Amherst area throughout the semester, emphasizes to them the importance of their “reading” this new, nonacademic, rhetorical context. As students work with these agencies to draft brochures, manuals, etc., they must take on the challenging task of learning what the agencies’ goals and philosophies are, exactly what the projects’ documents should accomplish, and even how to dress and behave while working with agency staff. In other words, they have to come to terms with writing outside the safe and familiar classroom setting, which, Deans point out, clearly links this course, and other writing courses like it, with Dewey’s philosophy to community-based, action-oriented, education. Furthermore, according to Deans, what places this course, and the writing-for paradigm as a whole, in the Deweyan camp is that students are guided through this difficult terrain by Gullion as they navigate their way through it; they are expected to think critically about the differences between writing for these agencies and writing in the classroom, about how they adapt (or do not adapt) to the social context of the agencies, and how they make critical decisions about their writing based on the “real-life” audiences for whom they write.

Because the writing for the community paradigm adheres so closely to Dewey’s approach to service-learning, it also reflects the weak points of his philosophy. Critics of writing courses that take the writing-for approach, says Deans, point out that in many cases what makes it a part of the service-learning movement is simply its connection with nonprofit agencies; otherwise, they say, there’s no substantial difference between such courses and, for example, technical writing courses, which require students to do writing for local businesses. Certainly, say such critics, writing-for courses move students out into the community, and certainly these students are doing a valuable service for those in need, but shouldn’t these students also be given the opportunity to reflect critically on the social injustices that created that need in the first place?

Deans defends the writing-for approach in Chapter Three, pointing out that writing-for courses can be beneficial to composition instructors who do not have the time to cover both rhetorical and cultural issues in just one semester. This is one of a number of points at which the author emphasizes the always-present problem in designing service-learning courses around the constraints of the academic calendar.

If writing for the community courses such as Gullion’s adhere to John Dewey’s idea of service-learning, then courses that concentrate on writing about the community adhere to Paulo Freire’s idea of service-learning by encouraging students to think critically about the power structures at work in that same local community. In Chapter Four, “Writing About the Community: Critical Pedagogy, Academic Literacy, and First-Year Composition,” Deans focuses primarily on Bruce Herzberg’s Expository Writing I & II courses at Bentley College. While Gullion’s goal is to help her students fine tune their nonacademic rhetorical skills, Herzberg’s goal in this two-semester course sequence is to help his students use academic discourse to think and write critically about broad social problems that affect the local community they serve. Unlike Gullion, Herzberg, a neo-Marxist, does not regard student service as primary to the goals of his courses; instead, he expects his students to see their experiences in doing community work as one “text” among several (e.g., assigned books and articles focusing on cultural critique) that can be “read” as indicative of the way groups and individuals without political/economic power are marginalized in a capitalist society. Furthermore, by having his students do their service at a local elementary school, he invites them to
concentrate their critical thinking on literacy and the American education system. Herzberg asks his students to reflect on (in the first semester) and research (in the second semester) systemic problems directly related to literacy and education, all while learning how to communicate effectively through academic discourse.

Herzberg’s method of having his students reflect on their service through academic discourse and to concurrently critique the system that produced this discourse, is indicative of the writing-about paradigm. This approach is time-consuming, however, which is why Herzberg, who is reluctant to forfeit precious classroom time needed to prepare first-semester undergraduates to think and communicate on a college level, minimizes the role of service in his courses. This strategic downplaying of service, says Deans, raises the fundamental question of whether “...a focus on critique can shortchange active...intervention in the community in the form of public rhetorical acts” (p.109). Since time constraints are, and probably always will be, a part of academic reality, there is no real solution to this question of adequately balancing critique and community intervention in service-learning courses. However, Deans explores a third paradigm, writing with the community, that seems to bring the best of the writing-for and writing-about paradigms together effectively.

In Chapter Five, “Writing With the Community: Social Cognitive Rhetoric, Intercultural Discourses, and the Community Literacy Center,” Deans looks at a writing-with project sponsored by Carnegie Mellon University and directed by Linda Flower and Wayne Peck. Located at Community House in Pittsburgh’s North Side section, the Community Literacy Center (CLC) provides a site at which community and university members can come together to collaboratively address issues of discrimination, poverty, police brutality, etc., and other problems facing this inner-city community. Deans focuses attention on Linda Flower’s work with her college students who serve as mentors to local teens at the CLC.

Flower, whose theory of cognitive rhetoric stresses the importance of strategic problem solving within a social context, guides these mentors as they work to produce collaborative texts (e.g., a magazine addressing local issues) with teens at the center. In these texts, the teens can express themselves, using their own rhetorical voices, about immediate community concerns, while the mentors help them use the strategies of academic discourse to organize and develop their writing in a way that makes the teens’ messages clear to a wider audience. Subsequently, these texts become the basis for what CLC directors call “Community Conversations,” or meetings between local residents, university members, parents, local officials, etc., at the center. Furthermore, these undergraduates reflect on their mentoring work in the classroom, observing how the work they do at the CLC constitutes what Flower calls “literate social action.”

Deans points out that because literate social action necessarily requires students to both intervene directly in community issues, and to think systemically about those issues (i.e., helping teens take into account the various sources of power represented in Community Conversations), Flower’s writing with the community courses bring Deweyan and Freirean theories to bear. He goes on to say, however, that since Community Conversations are not set up to attain a “prescribed policy outcome,” but rather to afford “intercultural conversation and negotiation,” Flower’s and the CLC’s approach to service-learning is more in line with Dewey than with Freire: “here we see one concrete example of how Dewey’s pragmatist faith in experiential, provisional outcomes stands in contrast to Freire’s utopian faith in revolutionary outcomes” (p. 117). In other words, the writing with the community paradigm, at least as it is exemplified by Flower and the CLC, helps students to understand the structure of the authority/community relationship (the first step in Freirean approach), and to work directly with both community and authority to make that structure work for the good of all involved — to work democratically (the final step in the Deweyan approach).

Up to the end of Chapter Five, Deans highlights what makes each paradigm of teaching composition through service-learning distinct from the other two. As Deans points out in Chapter One, and recaps in Chapter Six, the process of making these distinctions between paradigms can help composition instructors make informed decisions about how we customize service-learning to fit the courses we teach. Therefore, what makes his three-paradigm typology so useful to the reader is, in the author’s own words, its “heuristic...nature” (p. 144). For this reason, Writing Partnerships is not simply a collection of anecdotal data on what makes community-based writing courses and programs tick, but is instead a tool for the reader to use as they work at customizing service-learning to their own particular writing course. This is the book’s greatest strength.

The heuristic process of differentiating each paradigm from the others also helps us conceptualize the common ground between them that is so necessary in establishing service-learning as a viable movement within English studies. To this end, Deans begins Chapter Six, “Prospects for Service-
Learning in Composition” by presenting a list of commonalities between the writing-for, writing-about, and writing-with approaches:

Despite the differences I have discerned among community writing paradigms, all three share characteristics that distinguish them as a whole from current practice in college writing instruction: an emphasis on experiential learning, an insistence on living out a dialectical relationship between action and reflection, a synergistic pairing of community work with academic study, a folding of community outreach experiences into research and writing, and a commitment to addressing community problems and social injustice through writing and rhetoric. (p. 144)

Because of these shared characteristics, Deans asserts, we as composition instructors do not need to dogmatically adapt our courses to only one of the three paradigms; instead, he urges, we can and should find ways to “...weave distinct but complementary strands of the three paradigms...” as we “address distinct yet related literacy goals” (p. 147).

This invitation for readers to innovatively weave together various pedagogical approaches into customized writing courses is the focus of this sixth and final chapter of Deans’ book. He goes on, here, to exemplify this weaving process by describing a course he himself designed that brings together writing-for and writing-about approaches by, among other things, using “...a writing-about essay not only to teach academic discourse but also to help students prepare for their writing-for project later in the semester” (p. 148). Aware that his course is probably reflective of many, “perhaps most,” writing courses that utilize service-learning, Deans calls for more research on how and why various combinations of the paradigms work. “While this book offers a framework for such analysis,” writes Deans, “more research into programs that combine community writing paradigms is needed, as is more qualitative research that accounts for student experiences of service-learning” (p. 161).

Deans concludes this chapter, and his book, by calling on readers to go beyond designing, teaching, and doing research on service-learning composition courses; he asks readers to develop strategies for making service-learning adaptable to the curricula of English departments nationally. Such strategies, Deans insists, must take into account the specific limitations each particular college and university presents, and must deal pragmatically with each. An example of such limitations (one that is particularly ironic) is that land-grant universities, whose mission, to a large extent, is to promote public service, see themselves primarily as research institutions. For this reason, Deans notes, the infrastructures of these large universities tend to support short-term research projects, rather than programs designed to support innovative pedagogical approaches, especially if those programs need the kind of careful, long-term development service-learning requires.

Such institutional limitations are, indeed, daunting, but Deans offers some practical advice for dealing with them. For instance, he suggests that the service-learning movement follow in the footsteps of a fairly successful, and more firmly established, predecessor in composition studies: Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). He points specifically to two of the highly-successful courses he examines in the book that are part of WAC programs: Laurie Gullion’s Writing in Sport Management and Bruce Herzberg’s Expository Writing I & II. Being able to contextualize their courses into larger, already-established programs, Deans says, has helped both Gullion and Herzberg find more political and logistical support than they would have had otherwise. Furthermore, Deans goes on, WAC can provide service-learning with research on the effects of active, collaborative, contextualized learning on students. “If,” writes Deans, “faculty can be convinced of the cognitive and pedagogical value of service-learning, as many have been persuaded of the cognitive and pedagogical value of WAC, then the prospects for community writing projects will be brighter” (pp. 165-66).

Indeed, the prospects of community-based writing, and of service-learning in general, are bright if Deans’ conceptual framework in Writing Partnerships is treated as the author intends: as an invitation to design service-learning composition courses that reflect, and even expand on, pedagogical approaches that have been developed over the past few decades; as a model for carrying out, and focusing, qualitative research on the outcomes of such courses; and as a starting-point for working out strategies for making community-based writing the logical next step in the yet unfinished process of linking cultural studies and composition.

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