

ENG 651 Community Engagement Reflection

The primary purpose of this reflection document, and the paper into which it will grow, is to help you organize your experience into copy that can be included in a cover letter or discussed in a job interview. I am hoping to help you recognize what skills you have developed, and to generate language that codifies those skills.

I am also hoping that reflective practice will deepen your learning, and increase the likelihood that what you have worked on in this class will transfer to other academic and professional situations (see, for instance, Gorlewski & Greene, 2011; Kennison & Misselwitz, 2002). At their best, I believe graduate classes offer experiences that can develop into interests: they show pathways to how the discipline thinks about its problems and work. So, beyond the primary purpose of aiding you in a job search, I'm also interested in highlighting the disciplinary and intellectual relevance of the work we've been doing.

Overall, I think the questions below follow Baker's four step model to reflection (outlined in Kennison 2012):

Baker's Four-Step Model

- Identification
 - Considering multiple perspectives triggers the cognitive dissonance that prompts reflection.
 - Engage in converging conversations where multiple perspectives are considered
- Description
 - Relate happenings as a chronological series of events
- Significance
 - answer a number of puzzling questions
- Implications
 - explain how the experience made a difference in their practice and how they would react differently to similar experiences in the future

Let's start with some basic questions that **describe** your experience and speak a bit to its **significance** (adapted from [the Ryerson University Best Practices for Reflection page](#)). First, some "what did I do?" questions:

- *What organization did you work for? And what is that organization's mission?*
- *What kind of work did you do for the organization? What deliverables has/will your labor produce(d)? Describe this work in detail here (such details will be useful to you in the future)*

Second, some "how do I feel about what I did?" questions:

- How do you feel about the work that you have completed?
- What do you see as the strengths of the work you have completed so far?
- What do you wish you had either done differently, and/or what do you know could be improved?

Third, some “what have I learned?” questions:

- What are a few new skills/technologies/practices/knowledges you have acquired through this project?
- How has working with a community partner changed the way you consider your work?

Along these lines, a few prompts from Kennison & Misselwitz (2002):

- It surprised me to find out...
- This is important to me because...
- This has affected the way I think/feel about...

Let’s turn to four questions (based on the Rentz and Mattingly reading) derived from the Commission on National and Community Service’s 4 criteria for evaluating a service-learning project. These should dig a bit deeper into the **significance** of your project, and also begin to speak to **implications**.

1. Students Learn Through Service Experiences that Meet **Actual** Community Needs
 - a. Do you feel as if your project addressed an actual community need? What need? How aware were you of that need before the project started?
2. The Service Experience **Structured** Time for the Students to Think, Talk, or Write About Their Service Activities
 - a. What else could I have done to help structure your time and monitor your progress?
3. The Service Experience Provides Students with Opportunities to Use Newly Acquired Skills and Knowledge in Real-Life Situations in Their Community
 - a. I think you’ve already answered this question in the previous section, so...
 - b. Tell me about what you learned interacting directly with your community partner. What did *they* teach you? What valuable feedback did they provide? What characteristics did they model or exemplify?
4. The Service Experience Extends Student Learning Beyond the Classroom and Helps to Foster a Sense of Caring for Others
 - a. How/has the project influenced the way you perceive a problem?
 - b. How likely is it that you will continue working on this problem after the conclusion of the course?
 - i. Very Likely
 - ii. Somewhat Likely
 - iii. Somewhat Unlikely
 - iv. Very Unlikely
 - c. If likely, then how might you continue this work after our class ends?
5. Thinking of Clark’s emphasis on action research:

- a. What are ways that, beyond the deliverables you have developed for this project, you might work to redress the underlying problem creating your clients' needs? Who else could we write to? What else could we write? How might we make *your* project about more than a “wham and bam one time student project”?

Weighing in on the “Care” Debate

The question below is a modified version of the question I included in this year’s MA Exam. Here I would like you to explore the **implications** and **identification** of your community engagement by putting your experiences in conversation with a disciplinary conversation; specifically the debate regarding whether service learning projects need to include the 4th criteria above. Should we expect/demand that service learning projects “helps to foster a sense of caring for others”?

Below you will find selections from Dave Clark’s (2004) “Is Professional Writing Relevant? A Model for Action Research?” and Rentz and Mattingly’s “Selling Peace in a Time of War: The Rhetorical and Ethical Challenges of a Graduate-Level Service Learning Course.” (note that the selections from Rentz and Mattingly were all authored by Rentz). Recall the arguments made by Rentz in her article with Mattingly, and the way that those arguments read as a “subtweet” regarding Clark’s emphasis on action research and service learning. I’d like you to spend a few hundred words reflecting on how your experience this semester resonates with either of their positions.

Clark:

Recent work of some professional writing scholars has sought to bring “action” to our research, to embrace community engagement as a means to give students nonacademic contexts for their work, to promote an active vision of citizenship, to serve the community, and to create a new variety of relevance for our research. This is a relevance that may not gain us citations in sociological journals or in *Nature*, but it leverages our best research tools and strategies to new applications that have the potential to increase the value placed on our work by a wide variety of community agencies. One variety of such work has been service-learning, a major curricular push here at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), where our Institute of Service Learning works to connect the classroom experience with work in Milwaukee nonprofits. As Ellen Cushman argues, however, community service learning in English Studies has been largely a pedagogical and service-based movement (“Sustainable” 41), where too often the self-defined needs of community agencies are secondary to the “wham and bam” of one-time student projects (40). Although faculty members gain a “new sense of purpose in their teaching,” Herzberg suggests that service-learning projects frequently are charitable work rather than attempts to educate students about ideology and social change (59), in a country where the lack of critical governmental support necessitates many of the soup kitchens, literacy programs, and community-based nonprofits in which we place our students.

Rentz:

For students preparing for professional-writing careers, service-learning should emphasize “good work” over “doing good,” while nevertheless emphasizing ethical responsibility and critical reflection. [...]

To be honest, I didn’t think very deliberately about how the course might encourage the benefits of service-learning referred to variously as “caring for others,” “civic-mindedness,” “citizenship,” or “doing good.” I simply wanted to partner our students with a nonprofit organization for whom they could perform significant work, while reviewing and synthesizing what they had learned over the previous five quarters. Our program offers skills-oriented courses on such subjects as web design, online documentation, editing, writing reports and proposals, and promotional writing, but it also requires that students take a theory course—either Rhetoric or Professional Writing Theory—and the skills-oriented courses also include theoretical components. With its intentional blending of practice and reflection, service-learning seemed the perfect pedagogical basis for our capstone course in Professional Writing and Editing.

Should my students have also studied the forces that generate problems of conflict and bias in Cincinnati and our society in general? And should they have adopted CPE’s mission as their own? According to much of the literature on service-learning, they should have.

But in professional writing programs, and perhaps in most fields of study not oriented to social service by definition, our students are being trained to offer their services from the position of professional experts. To the extent that social analysis and critique will help them become more responsible professionally, we have an obligation to investigate social issues. We need to be careful, though, not to lose sight of the fact that we are preparing our students to serve others’ communication needs. We also need to be sure they understand that professionalism is different from advocacy. The professional relationship is based on the understanding that experts will bring their knowledge and skill to bear on clients’ needs but that, in fact, experts will maintain some distance between themselves and their clients.