

Making Space for Service Learning in First-Year Composition

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ABSTRACT

The promise of service learning as a high-impact educational practice has received ample scholarly attention, yet more research is needed to describe how writing program administrators can initiate flexible, healthy spaces for service learning within their writing programs. Through a description and application of four keys to postmodern planning—context, travel, connection, and scale—this article offers WPAs a productive heuristic for creating healthy spaces for service learning in their programs. This heuristic enables WPAs to extrapolate information from experiences as service-learning practitioners and connect it to what might be practiced on a programmatic scale.

Developing service-learning curricula for first-year composition courses that are also general education curriculum (GEC) courses can be a daunting task for WPAs. The curriculum is already crowded, the teachers are already working hard to reach maximum output, and the benefits may seem underwhelming. In addition, one of the central tensions of initiating service learning as a WPA comes from the uneasy relationship between having a concrete and strategic plan for a programmatic service-learning initiative and the dangers institutionalized service-learning endeavors can pose to the overall vitality of a program (Mathieu). The role of the WPA is fraught, balancing issues of control and freedom, sustainability and turnover, reciprocity and outcomes.

Yet working on the programmatic scale is important because the push to incorporate service-learning opportunities into first-year composition comes from many directions: research in rhetoric and composition, educational research, and even institutional missions. To address the service-learning challenges, WPAs need new tools that help them to identify opportunities, act on those opportunities, and reflect critically on their

work. This article describes how postmodern planning concepts provide one such tool by connecting service learning in the classroom to service learning in the writing program. WPAs who have developed or want to develop service learning in their programs can better balance the inherent issues through a postmodern planning framework because it creates spaces for inquiry, invention, and revision throughout the evolution of service learning within a writing program. It allows service learning to develop as a process rather than as a lock-step strategic plan. In this way, it enables the creation of a healthy space for service learning.

THE WPA AND SERVICE LEARNING

The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement asserts that social responsibility should be a core element of a twenty-first century education. Their report, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (available on the Association of American Colleges and Universities' website), advocates community-based service and research and "collaborative, generative partnerships" that teach students how systems work and can be changed (3, 8, 33). Undergraduate composition courses are one place for these collaborative and generative partnerships to take place because the course has a strong connection to public engagement through its emphasis on rhetoric and rhetoric's ties to public discourse. Bruce Herzberg sums up the disciplinary ideal best, writing

If we wish to claim that the composition course is truly about rhetoric, about civic virtue, and about public as well as academic discourse, we must learn how to conceptualize the connections between the academy and society in ways that our students, our administrators, and we ourselves find convincing. ("Service Learning" 396)

To teach rhetoric is, for many rhetoricians, to teach civic engagement. Yet, any foray into service-learning research in first-year writing courses will reveal both excitement and ambivalence. Even as Eli Goldblatt argues persuasively for the benefits of curricula incorporating service and community-literacy learning, he states plainly, "I do not particularly advocate for service or community-based learning in FYC courses" (294). The challenges are well documented and range from course and term structure to department structures to faculty and student assessment (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters, *Writing the Community*). Developing critical consciousness, one of the many purported benefits of service learning, has proven elusive in multiple contexts (Feigenbaum; Herzberg, "Community Service"; Hutchinson). Additionally, students may have other, more pressing, learning needs. They may not possess the maturity to follow through with the service. Their

writing may simply not be good enough yet to produce something of high quality about, for, or with a community partner. Likewise, as many service-learning practitioners will attest, the investment of time in identifying, developing, and sustaining relationships with community partners can be massive, intimidating, and ultimately prohibitive (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters, "Service-Learning" 1).

On a programmatic scale, there are even more considerations. In *Tactics of Hope*, Paula Mathieu gets "nervous about initiatives to expand and institutionalize service-learning programs" because faculty too often show up with predetermined agendas (85). To do so, she argues, "runs the risk of framing local communities as generic sites of need, eager to benefit from university largess" (90). Add to these challenges the constraints that many first-year composition courses have as GEC courses in terms of content, textbooks, grading, and so on, and it is understandable why WPAs might defer service-learning initiatives until some idealized future date.

Nonetheless, if WPAs accept the premise that service and community-based literacy practices are desirable in introductory writing courses, they need tools that will enable them to sustain these projects in healthy and productive ways. Fortunately, past scholarship describing a theory of WPAs as postmodern planners provides one way to develop such tools.

POSTMODERN PLANNING IN WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

In "Program Administrators as/and Postmodern Planners," Tim Peebles draws on urban and public planning scholarship to establish a new conceptual framework for thinking about writing program administration. There are many similarities between conceptualizations of planning and conceptualizations of WPA work. David C. Perry, whom Peebles relies on to make his own argument, suggests that "it's hard to produce a plan that at once captures the conditions of the society, city, or policy area and also meets the demands of each of the citizens experiencing the problems society is mobilized to process" (211). He adds, "It's hard to be both scopic and comprehensive and immediate and individually responsive" (211). In a similar manner, WPAs work to make sense of wide-ranging perspectives including individual student experiences, the training and needs of faculty, the goals of colleges and administrators, and the theories and pedagogies of other rhetoric and composition scholars while simultaneously advancing things like pedagogies, curriculum, and assessment. It is hard to be comprehensive and individually responsive.

Faced with these complexities, both WPAs and planners seek to articulate their roles. For example, as one means of navigating the complexities

of urban and public planning, Perry offers a spatial approach that suggests “what planners do is *not* simply make plans but rather ‘make space’” (223; emphasis in original). But what’s the difference between making plans and making space?

An answer resides in the distinctions we make between composition as a science and composition as a humanistic field. Compare David Perry’s “Making Space: Planning as a Mode of Thought” with David Foster’s “What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Composition?” for an excellent illustration of the tension in composition studies between science and humanism. Perry writes “planning is not so much a linear progression of practices—one displacing another—as it is an emerging spatial practice joining one new approach to another in the evolving production and reproduction of the relations of capital and the urban society attendant to it” (222). Then consider David Foster’s argument:

Science attempts to build knowledge cumulatively by drawing new understandings out of earlier, disproven understandings; the familiar example of a disproven Copernicanism illustrates this aspect of scientific inquiry. On the other hand, as North cogently argues, humanistic study—philosophy, theology, theories of the arts, even history—flourishes through dialectic, in which one mode of thinking draws life in response to all other major modes of thought, none ever permanently “disproved” or abandoned. (35)

Writing program administration, like composition, like planning, draws life from dialectic. It is not a linear march toward a goal. It is a fluctuating amalgamation of ideas, practices, people, and places. It is the aforementioned “evolving production and reproduction” of relationships, and it is the design of spaces where this dialectic can and does occur. Peeples, for his part, suggests that this model of planner as space maker is valuable to WPAs because it involves the WPA in “the ongoing, recursive, real-time, local making of healthy spaces” (123). In other words, conceiving of writing program administration as postmodern planning provides a dynamic and holistic description of the WPA that acknowledges the multiplicity of roles and the need for dialectic. In order to achieve this spatial approach to planning that facilitates dialectic, Peeples provides a new conceptual framework for the work of writing program administration: context, travel, connectedness, and scale.

THE FOUR KEYS

The first key to postmodern planning, *context*, is an easy concept to transfer to writing program administration because it is a foundational, disci-

plinary one. The most important feature of context is that it both shapes and is shaped by planning. Factors like institutional and geographic location shape how and why service learning might happen. A good example comes from Nicole Amare and Teresa Grettano who framed their own work in service and community literacy as writing outreach that was not course-based. Instead, they developed workshops of broad interest that were open to both students at the institution and community members at large. Their context shaped how they engaged in service and community-based learning, and their actions in turn reshaped the context. Context is doubly important for WPAs as postmodern planners because the context of a writing program also includes a multiplicity of other contexts such as instructors' classrooms and, in the case of service-learning initiatives, the contexts of non-profits and local community organizations.

The second key to postmodern planning is *travel*. The easy preconception of this key is that it means to go where the action is: Get out of the office or the classroom, and experience the world beyond. Peeples's adaptation is significantly more complex. The "practice of planning must be considered a dialectical one, always traveling between the lived space and the abstract space of society" (Perry 225) and to this, Peeples adds, "A dialectical approach to planning as a spatial practice requires us to travel between abstract, designed spaces, and everyday, lived ones" (125). Though the connection is not explicit, the sentiment here seems to echo the arguments of Chris Anson, Dirk Remley, Ellen Cushman, and others who call for course instructors—or planners—to engage in and model the same forms of critical reflection that they ask of their students. Writing program administration requires significant travel, moving back and forth between the abstract spaces WPAs design and the everyday, lived spaces they inhabit with their students, faculty, and institutional and community partners.

Travel enables *connection*, the third key to postmodern planning. Neither Perry nor Peeples offers abundant explanation of how connection plays out in planning. In fact, Perry specifically uses the term *connection*—something that joins or connects other things—while Peeples changes the term slightly to *connectedness*. This minor change is important. *Connectedness* implies a factor of degree, perhaps both in terms of quantity and durability. For example, I might say I have a *connection* to my undergraduate institution because I went to school there; however, my *connectedness* to the institution is determined by how many professors and friends I still talk with, how many athletic events I watch in person or on television, perhaps even if I donate and how much I donate to my alma mater. The quantity of connections as well as their strength, in essence, determines my connectedness to the institution.

The fourth key to postmodern planning, *scale*, and its connections, is shaped by the context in which it exists. In planning, scale signifies the process of establishing boundaries—social and geographical—between different places, locations, and experiences (Smith 64). According to Perry, scale “includes spaces of social activity; from the individual to the home and the neighborhood” (226). The work of (home) planners requires “jumping scales as they undertake the hard process of carrying out the dialectics of comprehensive housing services that produce homes for individual families” (Perry 228). If we shift this discourse back to the language of writing program administration, we are able to identify several similarities. Take, for instance, the different scales of academic institutions: the individual student, the student body, the individual instructor, the faculty, the WPA, the department, the college, and perhaps, the university as a whole. Each of these items constitutes its own scale because there are boundaries—social and geographical—between them. The work of the WPA as planner is to jump between them, establishing connections aimed at making healthy spaces both within and outside the program. For WPAs, this process is recursive and never fully complete:

Contrary to the more narrow professional interventions of almost all others at the site or scale of the production of space, the planner’s work is never done; it is, to repeat, a recursive spatial practice—meant to include both the design and building of physical infrastructure and the satisfactory use of the built space. (Perry 227)

WPAs as planners travel between the scales in an ongoing process of building and use. In this sense, they do not implement strategic, linear, lock-step visions. Instead, they inquire and listen to the “experiences of the lived spaces of the users” as well as the “institutional politics” (Perry 227). Informed by these scales, they use what they find to create healthy spaces that connect those scales in the most beneficial ways possible.

APPLYING THE FOUR KEYS

This section applies the framework for postmodern planning to a specific case—an attempt to initiate service learning in an introductory writing program.¹ It uses context, travel, connection, and scale to imagine and form a space for service and engagement to be both productive and healthy. What makes this approach postmodern is the embrace of complexity, the comfort with uncertainty, and the desire to “address” a challenge that possesses competing interests rather than “solve” it outright (Peeples 120). The uncertainty includes a willingness to let the number of service-learning courses in a program fluctuate and to accept the possibility that there may

be more than one programmatically approved means of achieving a successful service-learning course. This also means that there will be failures and mistakes. While they don't intend to make mistakes, WPAs know that they happen and, more importantly, that they provide important foundations for advancing knowledge. This framework provides a productive heuristic for initiating a service-learning program and a flexible tool for navigating challenges and sustaining qualities that service-learning practitioners and scholars advocate.

Context

The context begins with the writing program itself. In this case, the identity of the program as part of the General Education Curriculum (GEC) heavily influenced its shape. The GEC requirements don't exactly impede service and community-based learning; however, the need to consistently retain certain characteristics across all sections posed several unique challenges. The writing program is a two-course sequence on composition and rhetoric required of almost all university undergraduate students; exemptions are approved if the student has AP credit or transferred into the school with credit from other institutions. English 101 and English 102 are portfolio-based, and these portfolios account for 70 percent of the students' final grades. In addition to the portfolio component, students complete another ten or more pages of informal writing worth 20 percent. The final 10 percent of the course grades comes from participation.

Making space for service learning required careful consideration of how it would count toward students' overall course grades as well as how to frame the service and the writing itself rhetorically in productive and realistic ways. It also required a community partner willing to participate in this initial endeavor.

The community partner for this project was the Appalachian Prison Book Project (APBP). APBP was founded in 2004 by a professor at the university and her graduate students as an outcome of a course on prison literature. The 501(c)(3) organization sends books to incarcerated people in a six-state region. It is run entirely by volunteers who open letters from inmates, match those letters as best they can to their collection of donated books, and mail the books to the inmates. The project is located in a donated space on the second floor of a public library. APBP is located within several city blocks of the university's campus, which also makes it manageable to walk there. APBP's location, focus on literacy, close tie to the institution, and the director's enthusiasm for participating in a service-learning course made it an excellent partner.

Travel

In general, one section of English 102 in the Undergraduate Writing Program served as the primary vehicle for travel. It allowed me, as the WPA, to make connections between the different scales in the local context, such as connecting from the student experience, to the GEC requirement, to the instructor experience, and so on. Other methods enabled travel within the classroom itself. For example, classroom surveys yielded significant information that helped to shape my own thinking about how service learning could be integrated into the program.

Healthy spaces for service learning in introductory writing courses rely on three important principles.

Service learning should be a manageable responsibility that enables students and instructors to travel between abstract ideas and lived experiences. At the outset of the course, I decided that students would complete fifteen hours of service at APBP opening letters from inmates, filling the orders, and packaging the orders to be sent. This would mean roughly one hour of (home) work outside of class each week. To make sure students understood this as part of their coursework and not as an arbitrary add-on, I worked with a colleague at the Center for Service and Learning to compose a handout illustrating how the work fit into the course as well as its value (see Appendix A). Because of the GEC expectation that 90 percent of the students' grades would be based on their writing, the actual service hours would count toward the students' participation grade; however, the students' work at APBP would form the basis of several of their informal and reflective writing assignments as well as one of their four formal projects. As students worked to develop their facility with writing, they began to uncover the fact that the literacy skills of incarcerated people are significantly behind their "free peers" (Jacobi 4). We learned about and questioned the existence of for-profit prisons. Lessons about reading and writing as life skills vital to success in personal, civic, and professional spheres became juxtaposed with the understanding that many attempts to educate and improve the lives of incarcerated people are often met with staunch community resistance.

While this learning was taking place, there was growing concern about the amount of work students were asked to squeeze into their already busy schedules. In order to facilitate travel between my theorizing about students' time and their everyday lived experiences, I collected information through a brief questionnaire at the middle of the course (see Appendix B). As a result of the surveys and several in-class discussions, the students, APBP, and I collectively decided to change the hours of service from fifteen to ten.²

On the programmatic scale, these discussions with students as well as with the community partner and the Center for Service Learning helped us establish a model where both students and teachers could make a realistic and sustainable commitment in terms of both service hours and writing goals.

Making service learning polyvocal creates connections and increases connectedness to a project. Over the course of the semester, the course had three guest speakers: Alexis McMillen, program coordinator at the Center for Service and Learning; John Sura, retired Michigan State Trooper and Michigan Department of Corrections administrator;³ and Katy Ryan, director of the Appalachian Prison Book Project.

On an abstract level, each speaker operated like a node connecting the students to service, writing, and social justice. As the instructor, I could help students access various information, but I remained one node, one connection. By making the classroom polyvocal, the entire project and its purpose became more connected. Alexis McMillen discussed the value of service learning as a pedagogical approach, how students would record their time volunteering, and what those records meant for graduation and post-graduation contexts. John Sura provided the course with lived examples of the challenges faced by the criminal justice system and those enmeshed in it. Katy Ryan's visit fostered active discussion and questions from the class about why and how APBP operates. Questions that came up included the following: How do prison book projects know that they work? Do prison book projects measure outcomes? Should prison book projects send violent books to inmates? Who is imprisoned? What are the relationships between reading, stress, and transformation? These questions provide starting points for inquiry, starting points that Ryan took very seriously (see Appendix C). They are pathways for travel between the abstract ideas, preconceptions, and assumptions about the subject and their real-world, lived experience.

This principle of polyvocality led to a vital realization on the programmatic scale. In designing the course, my assessment and information collection focused solely on the student experience. Using the framework for postmodern planning as a heuristic for critical reflection also suggests that such a survey tool would be valuable if a version was supplied to the other project partners such as instructors, community partners, and the university's Center for Service and Learning. Because questionnaires do have limitations, WPAs must thoughtfully administer questionnaires that solicit feedback and create dialogue about successes, identify shortcomings, or generate new ideas. On a rhetorical level, the questionnaire might serve to demonstrate that the program itself is engaged in the valuable work of service learning. Guided interviews might provide similar opportunities.

Choice gives voice. The natural inclination in service-learning courses is to make all writing in the course about the service-learning topic or partner. Yet, with this framework, I chose to leave some of the writing open. Students were free to make their own connections between their experiences, their class discussions, and their writing, which ultimately allowed a healthier space for their work.

This principle of choice translates to the programmatic scale because of the many ways that service learning can be taught. Instructors may want to work with one community partner or have students work in groups with several or have each student work with individual partners of their choice. They may also choose to modify assignments in order to move closer to a goal or a connection that they see taking shape. Providing students and instructors with choice, even in the midst of GEC requirements, can create a healthy space for service learning.

CONCLUSION

This approach to making space provides a tool for integrating service learning within undergraduate writing programs. This implementation, however, has its costs. As Susan Wolffe Murphy has argued, “one cannot ask teachers to do ‘service learning’ quickly or cheaply, either in terms of money or time” (119). In this context and in many others I imagine, mandating that instructors develop service-learning courses may create unhealthy spaces. Yet at the same time, most likely, there are experienced instructors—both graduate teachers and adjunct faculty—who are interested in doing service learning and are unsure of how to proceed and even if service learning is allowed in GEC courses like introductory writing. To make space for this pedagogical approach, WPAs can employ the four keys to postmodern planning as a guide:

1. Context
 - What are the characteristics of the writing program, its students, and instructors?
 - What constraints must we work within?
2. Travel
 - What means are available for traveling between abstract ideas and lived spaces?
3. Connections
 - Who has a stake in service learning?
 - What kind of institutional support exists?
4. Scale

- What sort of commitment does my program/department/college/university/community have to service learning?
- What should the outcomes of service learning look like at different scales (student, instructor, program, department, college, university, community)?

In my own program, we have begun offering regular workshops on service learning that include information on the philosophies about service learning, how to incorporate it smoothly into the GEC courses, how to partner with the Center for Service and Learning on campus, and how to apply for the institution's service-learning course designation. Instructors are invited to explore and pursue service learning in their undergraduate writing courses voluntarily—when the time is right for them. The Undergraduate Writing Program does not have a mandate for service learning or a goal of integrating service learning into all of its courses. What it does have is space for service learning to happen.

NOTES

1. This research was approved by West Virginia University's Institutional Review Board (Protocol #1301008764).

2. On student midterm surveys, the average rating among the research participants at the midterm was 3 on a scale of 5. The median value for that question was also 3. The standard deviation for the midterm survey was .93, suggesting some disagreement.

3. John Sura is my father, and his career is one of my personal connections to issues of social justice and incarcerated people.

APPENDIX A: TOP REASONS TO COMPLETE THIS COURSE

I have a hunch about what you're thinking right now. It's probably something along the lines of, "Service? No way. I'm way too busy for this. This sounds way too hard."

To be honest, I think that is a completely fair and reasonable reaction. I know that you are a very busy person, and this work may seem daunting. Nonetheless, I want to present you with several reasons why, despite your hectic schedule, this may be an excellent course for you.

First, consider this simple study hour formula designed to help you achieve As in your courses.

Rule: Study two hours per credit hour for an easy class, three hours per credit hour for an average class, and four hours per credit in a difficult class.

Course	Credit Hours	Difficulty	Calculation	Study Hours
English 102	3	Easy	(3 credits x 2 hours)	6
English 102	3	Average	(3 credits x 3 hours)	9
English 102	3	Difficult	(3 credits x 4 hours)	12

Based on your previous experiences with writing, decide for yourself whether or not English 102 will be an easy course, an average course, or a difficult course. The answer is different for everyone.

Now, 15 hours of service over 15 weeks equals 1 hour per week. Whether you feel English 102 is easy, average, or difficult, one hour of study time can be assigned to your service obligation while leaving significant time to study and write for the course. Even more importantly, I have reduced the typical English 102 workload to accommodate for this time so that the service is fully integrated into the work of the course. It is not in addition to the work of the course. For example, I am reducing the overall number of pages you need to write through peer response and short writing assignments. You will also work collaboratively on one of the major projects.

Here are a few additional things to consider:

1. This has the potential to be one of the most unique educational experiences of your career at WVU, and offers a whole different way of learning (learning by “doing”).
2. You will gain real-world experience, which is exceptionally valuable for job applications, résumés, internship applications, graduate school applications, and interviews.
3. Due to the number of students taking English 102, it can be very difficult to find alternative sections.
4. In this course, you will be part of a supportive and engaged community of writers (including me).
5. Service-learning is one of the methods I’ve chosen to teach this course so that you have the opportunity not only to learn and grow in your composition skills, but also to make a difference in the life of someone else through service. It’s a win-win situation for all stakeholders.
6. The estimated value for volunteer time in 2011 was \$21.79 (http://www.independentsector.org/volunteer_time). You each will have the opportunity to contribute the equivalent of \$326.85 to the community, which for our whole class can potentially total \$6,537.00.

APPENDIX B: MIDTERM SURVEY

I value your feedback on English 102. This course should be helping you understand writing as a process, argue effectively and persuasively, explore and evaluate ideas, integrate research effectively into your writing, and understand the rules of writing. Please take a few moments at the midterm point to give me your comments and ideas for meeting the goals of this course.

1. Which assignments and activities have been most helpful, informative, or useful for you? Please explain why.
2. Would you change any assignment or activity? Please explain why and suggest an improvement or alternative.
3. Are there any aspects of writing that you would like to learn more about?
4. How helpful are class periods, handouts, comments on rough drafts, conferences, and email? Please explain.
5. On a scale from 1 to 5, (with 1 meaning not at all and 5 meaning exceptionally) how manageable has the service requirement been for the course?

1=Not Manageable 2 3=Neutral 4 5=Exceptionally Manageable

6. Please take a moment to explain your answer to question 5.

7. On a scale from 1 to 5, (with 1 meaning not at all and 5 meaning exceptionally) how valuable has the service requirement been for you?

1=Not Valuable 2 3=Neutral 4 5=Exceptionally Valuable

8. Please take a moment to explain your answer to question 6.

9. I welcome any additional comments or suggestions for improvement.

Please use the back of this page or additional paper if you need more space. Thanks for taking the time to give me your response.

APPENDIX C: LETTER FROM DR. RYAN

Feb 1, 2013

Dear Professor Sura and ENGL 102 Students,

I really enjoyed visiting your class yesterday, and I am excited about your participation in the Appalachian Prison Book Project (APBP). Thanks so

much for your questions, which I continue to mull over today.

Our conversation has me thinking about several research topics that are relevant to the future of APBP.

How might prison book projects document the effectiveness of their work? Have prison book projects tried to measure outcomes? [There is an interactive list of prison book projects in the country at <http://www.prisonbookprogram.org/otherprograms.php>.]

Should prison book projects be concerned about sending books that depict violence into prisons? What are the assumptions about imprisoned people that prompt this question?

Who *is* imprisoned in our country today? (I recommend Michele Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*: <http://www.newjimcrow.com/>.)

Do other prison book projects limit book selection? What are the advantages and disadvantages of placing limits on books?

What is the relationship between reading and stress levels? Between reading and personal transformation? What evidence is available?

Inspired by our discussion, I found these video clips about teaching humanities in prison that might be of interest.

Reading classic literature in Brazilian prisons: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLrqY-M3F3s>. Education in a women's prison: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AmYT8TH7nQ> Teaching Philosophy: http://www.ted.com/talks/damon_horowitz_philosophy_in_prison.html

Thanks so much for your contributions to the Appalachian Prison Book Project this semester. Please feel free to contact me with questions, concerns, and ideas.

Very best,

Katy Ryan

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