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Staying Engaged while Staying Home?: Service-Learning, Writing, and COVID-19

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Staying Engaged while Staying Home?: Service-Learning, Writing, and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic made everything more dangerous. As quickly as March 2020 could come and go, grocery shopping, getting a haircut, and going to school went from unremarkable obligations to potentially deadly risks. College instructors, with or without online teaching experience, got that experience out of necessity and began to rethink their teaching practices to achieve the same goals they pursued while teaching in person. In the summer of 2020, it became clear that these new approaches to teaching would not be temporary measures but rather a shift in teaching for the long term, something to learn rather than simply get through. For those of us committed to community-engaged education or service-learning, the challenges were poetically ironic. We went from inviting students to become engaged in communities outside of the classroom to wondering how we could get them engaged *in the class*. Between unreliable internet connections and the difficulty of persuading twenty-plus students—individually—to turn on their cameras, simply building a community in the class seemed a tall order. Then, instructors had to navigate the risks of sending those twenty-plus students into community organizations when we do not know how well they adhere to social distancing or vaccine guidelines or if they wear their masks off-campus.

However, I argue that, while we may not be able to pursue service-learning in the same ways we did before 2020, there already exists evidence that students need not put communities and themselves at risk of infection to do community-engaged work. As a part of a larger study described below, I interviewed several service-learners who formed partnerships that did not require physical contact. I include two of those case studies here as well as a description of a service-learning “light” course I taught that kept the partnership entirely digital. I present these case studies in light of research—both pre- and mid-pandemic—that categorizes online service-learning based on the hybridity of online and in-person interactions to show that online service-learning need not look one way. We can move forward in sponsoring students’ public literacy while weighing the benefits and drawbacks of online interaction alongside the risks of infection. This evidence helps inform the conversation about what to do with service-learning after COVID-19. Though my study is not exhaustive, I contend that there is room for not only the chance to educate future activists and public rhetors, but also to diversify literacy sponsorship in writing classrooms.

Despite the new risks for engaged learning that COVID-19 presents, the benefits of community-engaged education and service-learning are many, before, during, and after a pandemic. For example, Bacon (1999), Deans (2000), and Kraemer (2005) make clear many of the benefits of service-learning in their field of writing studies. Bacon ties engagement with communities other than the classroom community to more successful learning transfer. Furthermore, Deans draws attention to the benefits for students learning about how and why genres work when students write newsletters, press releases, memos, etc. for specific purposes and choose those genres based on what community organizations need those texts to do. Kraemer shows that partnering with community organizations decentralizes authority in the classroom and creates an opportunity for coaching relationships between instructors and students as opposed to one characterized by transactional writing. As noted above, shortly before the COVID-19 outbreak, I completed a study of 13 former service-learning students and showed that the benefits of service-learning on writing and rhetorical development emerge over time, and students who have inclinations for community action can learn how to act on those inclinations,

even years after taking their courses (2020). These case studies, and my experience teaching an in-person course with an online service-learning component, inform this study.

Sponsorship is Fundamental

Literacy, public or otherwise, requires sponsorship. Brandt (1998) describes the importance of literacy "sponsors," such as teachers, parents, and institutions for students' developing rhetorical abilities. The term "sponsor" differs from "teacher" because while teachers may sponsor literacy in the classroom by providing feedback and coaching student writing, others sponsor literacy as well. For example, parents can support students with advice or encouragement, and peers can offer review of written work or talk through assignments together. I recommend universities take on the responsibility of sponsoring public literacy by brokering service-learning opportunities. Universities already have contact with organizations that can use students' public literacy, personnel trained in sponsoring that literacy, and the equipment to carry out remote projects. I do not, however, wish to suggest that the university alone sponsors students' public literacy.

Indeed, it is worth remembering that, when defining what sponsors of literacy are, Brandt (1998) reminds us to "think about who or what underwrites occasions of literacy learning and use" (P. 166), and this is where university stakeholders can carefully use service-learning to effectively sponsor public literacy. Brandt's definition carries with it the subtle warning that sponsorship runs the risk of sponsors dominating students' ideas, limiting them to developing only the skills or dispositions of their sponsors. This risk should give literacy educators pause to consider how their unexamined (or examined) biases and beliefs can influence the literacy they sponsor. Brandt notes that literacy sponsorship may have inequities intrinsic to sponsorship, but that the ideal relationship between literacy sponsor and writer proves reciprocal (P. 167). Again, ideally, teachers and students learn from one another. But in the case of service-learning, another set of stakeholders come into the scenario.

Community partners can diversify literacy sponsorship. Service-learning differs from courses about public writing and community-faculty partnerships because students come into contact (virtual or otherwise) with members of communities other than that of their college. To avoid the pitfalls Mathieu notes (2005) about students entering recklessly into community spaces without proper training, instructors should seek out organizations and arrange such partnerships, but once the partnership has begun, instructors must cede some of the authority of the class so that students write for the community and not the professor. This decentralizes the authority of the instructor, creating more room for collaboration between students and instructors. Kraemer (2005) refers to the community organization in this scenario as the "third party" (P. 92) and argues that the perceived authority of the instructor—which can influence the kinds of risks writers take and the voices they cultivate—diminishes when students create drafts for the use of community organizations that have their own requirements for the text, ones the instructor does not dictate. The presence of this "third party" sets service-learning apart from courses about public writing and/or activism and creates an excellent arena for literacy sponsorship because the sponsor and the sponsored remain in service to the community organization. This can also mitigate the risk that literacy sponsorship winds up too one sided, with the sponsor overtaking emerging writers' rhetorical development.

Sponsorship is especially important in service-learning partnerships. As Mathieu (2005) notes, unsponsored community literacy can go awry, with damaging effects for writers, and importantly, community organizations. Therefore, it is imperative that future citizen-writers

enjoy sponsorship from instructors and institutions (including community organizations) so that they can learn how to write publicly. It is equally imperative that such writers enjoy decentralized sponsorship, where they can see first-hand how writing differs based on the intended use of the text and the expectations of the sponsor. To further complicate this dynamic, and as exemplified in the case studies of Peter and Tess below, community-facing texts often require collaboration not only between the writer and the organization, but also within groups of writers creating a text together.

Service-learning courses that offer the dual sponsorship of instructors and community stakeholders offer students productive cognitive dissonance (Long, 2008) when answering to multiple authorities as well as the experience of working in a group to determine what genres and approaches to writing would best satisfy those authorities, weighing each authority against the other to decide which writing moves to make. Dual sponsorship makes this possible.

Modes of Online Sponsorship

As noted above, COVID-19 hastened the move to online spaces for college students and faculty. This does not suggest, however, that COVID-19 alone instigated the move. In fact, research into online education—namely online service-learning—precedes the pandemic, and this leaves us with a set of data that allows us to go into online community engagement with some knowledge. This is especially important since faculty, students, and potential community partners now rightfully concern themselves with public health in the moment as well as social change over time. Faculty, previously focusing on educating students and brokering healthy partnerships between their students/classes and community partners, now must expand that concern beyond the potential harm students can do in community organizations, even in good faith, when their lack of knowledge about the community or lack of preparation by instructors can work against an organization's mission (Mathieu, 2005). Now, instructors must acknowledge the dangers in their students simply being present in community organizations, and they must act accordingly with respect to mask mandates and vaccination records, when applicable. Similarly, community organizations must continue to anticipate the already-existing risks of engaging with students possibly unfamiliar with (and thereby insensitive to) their mission or the specific challenges they face. Now, they also need to protect their communities from unintentional, biological threats from students and faculty who work in classrooms with multiple people per day and who do not always adhere to or even know the current mask mandates and vaccination requirements for safe public activity.

Research into online service-learning, also known as E-Service-Learning (Waldner, McGorry, and Widener, 2012) and E-Engagement (Krasny, Li, Gonzales, and Bartel, 2021), precedes concern for public health, but the practice still promises to create a safer way for students and communities to engage with each other. In fact, Waldner, McGorry, and Widener (2012) explore the benefits of service-learning without geographical constraints, finding that, despite long-held anxieties about online learning inhibiting social interaction (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Hill, Song, & West, 2009; Muirhead, 2004; Swan, 2002), an online environment can sustain such interaction and, in fact, make service learning more accessible. For example, Waldner et al. note that E-Service-Learning can address limitations for students as well as community partners, such as geographical constraints and challenges for people with disabilities, for whom travel brings with it hardships that their able-bodied peers do not face.

Reciprocally, Widener et al. note that not only can online environments create increased access and simplified logistics of location, but service-learning can also enhance online learning

by providing additional opportunities to engage in online classes. Indeed, many have discovered the challenges intrinsic to online teaching since 2020, and premier among them is the challenge of engaging students. In fact, recent research suggests instructors work to create a culture of participation by providing access to the needed technology to diminish distractions, to cultivate strong leadership from all stakeholders, and even for instructors to curate their physical environments (the room behind them) to limit student distraction and humanize the face they see on the screen (Garcia-Morales, Garrido-Moreno, and Martin-Rojas, 2021). Instructors face this challenge alone when teaching traditional online courses, but by sharing the responsibilities of sponsorship, instructors and community partners can work together to engage service-learners in work that addresses the needs of students as well as community members. In short, students in online service-learning courses take responsibility for both their performance as students, but also as public actors.

While Widener et al. note the benefits of online venues for service-learning pre-pandemic, this relationship has enjoyed renewed attention since the onset of COVID-19. This comes to pass partially out of necessity, as technological advancement continues to reshape online learning. For example, Krasney et al. (2021) argue that by involving an online component in a service-learning relationship, students learn not only how to work with diverse stakeholders, but also how to use online learning technology and, depending on the nature of the online service-learning activities, expand their use of social media to include performing activist and professional interactions. And when students and instructors must engage with technologies intrinsic to their online service-learning activities—such as shared documents, video conferencing, social media, and messaging apps—the affordances of those technologies become more apparent, even for use in non-community-engaged courses. In other words, using digital/remote technologies for service-learning partnerships means using them to create engagement and facilitate relationships, albeit virtually, and what we learn in online service-learning courses can apply to all online teaching, where engagement may remain elusive.

Four Approaches to Service-Learning Online

Citing Waldner et al. (2012), Schmidt (2021) as well as Krasney et al. (2021) describe four approaches to online service-learning post-COVID, with varying degrees of reliance on virtual interaction. Online service-learning can indicate a course in which classes are held online, while service-learning activities take place on-site; a course where classes are in-person, but service-learning activities take place online; a course where both coursework and service-learning take place in hybrid forms; and what Waldner et al. (2012) call "extreme service-learning" (P. 133), in which all activities take place strictly online. See Table 1 below. I labeled the four types by number and put them into Table #1 for reference, but Waldner et al. place these approaches on a spectrum.

	In-person SL	In-person class	Remote SL	Remote class
Type 1	✓			✓
Type 2		✓	✓	
Type 3	✓	✓	✓	✓
Type 4 (“extreme”)			✓	✓

***Table 1**: Four Types of Online Service-Learning as Described by Waldner et al.*

I present these categories not to suggest that any one of these approaches stands out as ideal, but rather to show that service-learning need not be limited to entirely online or in-person approaches. As the threat of COVID-19 changes in nature and severity, and in the terrifying but entirely possible event of another highly contagious threat to public health, stakeholders from community organizations and academic institutions can determine how they approach community engagement safely.

The Case for Sponsoring Public Writers: Two Case Studies and One Engaged Class

Indeed, decisions about community engagement must be made by both community and academic stakeholders while weighing the risks they are willing to take. The risk of spreading COVID-19 to communities is great. Considering the pandemic inordinately affects communities of color and working-class communities—those whose access to higher education is already limited and precarious—this risk can simply negate any of the positive work in-person service-learning can do. But the risk of not sponsoring engaged, public writing is also great. The COVID-19 pandemic spread across the United States quickly, and it drew attention to existing crises, such as systemic and cultural racism, as well as the physically and verbally violent reactions to measures addressing racism. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic spread with the help of misinformation, and without sponsorship in public writing, students may graduate ill-equipped to speak truth to power and ignorance or, more importantly, needing the know-how to insert themselves into public conversations effectively.

This does not mean that social action is worth the health and safety of *any* stakeholders involved in university-sponsored community engagement, especially community members or organizations kind enough to enter into partnerships with university stakeholders. Such community engagement can happen online, and while this may mean fewer opportunities for students to meet people and physically bridge the divide between community and academy as well as learn to work for the goals of community organizations, online service-learning can sponsor students’ public writing as well as provide a safer partnership for community members and organizations.

There is little evidence as of yet to show that online service-learning can effect social change in the short-term. Similarly, there has not yet been enough time to show that online service-learning after COVID-19 has desirable long-term effects. In place of such evidence, I share here two case studies of students who engaged in service-learning activities that did not require in-person contact to show that such experiences can sponsor students with a desire to learn how to use their writing to effect change. I’ve pulled these case studies from a larger IRB-approved study I did in 2019 at the University of Connecticut on the long-term effects of service-learning on college writers. While I did not account for COVID-19 in the original study—my

research preceded the pandemic—these case studies show how potentially remote service-learning activities can sponsor public literacy.

The cases of Peter and Tess represent what Waldner et al. (2012) might categorize as Type #2, in which coursework takes place in person, but service-learning activities may occur online. Peter's work was not *necessarily* online, but it could have been easily migrated to an online environment using shared documents and video chat. Tess' work, as reported here, was remote, though it took place over the phone rather than online.

Peter: Fall 2015

When I sat down with Peter, he was a senior in his seventh semester of college, planning to graduate one semester early. His major was Accounting, but he had switched in his first year from Electrical Engineering after taking a general education course in Accounting. He said that when he first got to the University of Connecticut, and when he began his First-Year Writing (FYW) course with a service-learning component in 2015, he habitually wrote in the five-paragraph model he learned in high school, but he recalls his FYW professor worked to help students break away from that model. Peter's "point of departure" (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak, 2014) in writing was that he wrote for defined goals, normally writing for himself and employing writing habits that he found successful, and as we will see, he had not abandoned those habits by his senior year in college; he did, however, learn to employ new ones, such as revision and collaboration. Indeed, Peter noted that the writing projects in his service-learning class, and especially the service-learning project, proved more involved than other projects he had done before or since.

For the class' service-learning project, Peter and his group advocated for ConnPIRG, a consumer organization based in Hartford, Connecticut that stood up against large corporations when their practices threaten public health and civic participation. ConnPIRG has a University of Connecticut-affiliated chapter, UConnPIRG, which is student-led and funded, and some students from Peter's class chose to work with UConnPIRG to advocate for solar energy use on campus. Peter recalled that their writing for this project was collaborative, and that Peter's group put together a document encouraging UConn to invest in solar or other forms of renewable energy. This project, interestingly, straddles Deans' (2000) writing *for* the community and writing *with* the community, as UConnPIRG serves the UConn community, but it is a part of the larger ConnPIRG, which serves the greater Connecticut community. Peter's project differed from others also because it would align itself more with Long's (2008) "tactical pedagogy," in which students circulate their own public texts to effect social change. Peter noted that this project required him to rethink his approach to writing and readily admitted that he tended to write "the night before" a paper is due. But with this project, each member had to draft their contributions, and the group had to assemble those contributions into a larger text that they would circulate more broadly than they would a term paper. Peter also reflected that this project was important to him because it, in his words, "actually mean[t] something." I find Peter's words here significant, not because I believe that he felt his own academic work did not mean anything, but because it seemed he sensed a larger meaning to work created collaboratively and not "owned" by the university. Ede and Lunsford's (2012) reflections on their collaborative partnerships includes not only the specific exigency of collaborative texts, but also the emergence of corporate universities' ownership of materials and published texts. Of course, Peter's coursework was not

university-branded, but its circulation was limited to a university audience[1]; therefore, it could be said that these texts are for the university. But the public nature of Peter's UConnPIRG texts make them more widely circulated and as a result, more meaningful to writers accustomed to an audience of one.

Peter readily admitted during our interview to writing his college papers the night before they were due. Regardless, he felt the service-learning experience was important, firstly because he contributed to a text that could potentially make change on campus, but also because he learned, though revision and feedback from his peers and professor, how to write more concisely and with more style. He noted that the project, which required collaboration and spoke to a broad audience, required him and his group to manage the demands of an organization outside of the classroom. Bacon (1997) notes that demands such as these can represent a conflict for students who do not appreciate the value of learning to manage demands that they perceive as at odds with each other, but Peter seemed to have come to terms with that experience in the years since his service-learning course, at least when it came to his writing ability. Similarly though, Peter valued his writing experience during the service-learning activity, even though he did not acknowledge transferring the habits of revision and collaboration too extensively to his academic writing. While this may seem like Peter did not learn anything from his service-learning writing, the value he placed on the experience and the public text writing processes and outcomes he valued suggest he was aware of Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2015) threshold concept: "Learning to Write Effectively Requires Different Kinds of Practice, Time, and Effort" (Yancey, 2015, p. 46). For the purpose of writing texts "that matter," Peter valued the collaboration and revision he participated in to meet the demands of UConnPIRG. Even if he chose not to pursue that kind of writing further in his academic career, the public-writing habits—revision, collaboration, awareness of audience—remain in his repertoire for use selecting genres and modes for public writing and action.

Interestingly, when I asked him if he had participated in any community action or activity at the time of the interview and, if so, whether or not he attributed that action to his service-learning experience, he said he did engage in community action, but he does not attribute it consciously to the service-learning activity.

> I have. I don't really attribute it to that just because [with] our service learning, we were kinda hands off with ConnPIRG. Like, they basically told us like, "This is what we want." And then we just went out and did it.

Here, Peter explicitly acknowledges the demands of a community organization and having to weight them against the demands of a course or professor. While he presents that bifurcated responsibility as an onus of sorts, he acknowledges it, and compares it to other community-engaged work. And Peter does engage in community activity in his own town, though not necessarily as a citizen-writer. At the time of our interview, his family's small business regularly held an fundraisers for an animal shelter in town, and Peter also volunteered at the shelter year-round, seeming to prefer the agency afforded him in that experience. But Peter valued the service-learning experience insofar as it exposed him to collaborative writing that required more of a process than he was used to and had the potential for influence larger than a term paper shared within the boundaries of the classroom.

Peter's service-learning work happened in person, but the nature of the work lends itself readily to Google docs or other shared documents as well as many of the tools we've learned to

[1] See also Bacon's (1997) comments on "authenticity" in students' service-learning writing in "Community Service Writing: Problems, Challenges, Questions."

use since March 2020, such as Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate. So while Peter's experience does not prove indicative of the benefits of strictly online service-learning, instructors have access to and experience with the tools to make that work remote.

Tess: Fall 2015

Tess took her composition course with a service-learning component in the Fall of 2015, and at the time of our interview, she was a senior with a double major in Economics and Human Rights and a minor in Public Policy. Though she took writing courses in high school, including AP English, and she enjoyed writing and reading in general, she did not feel very motivated to engage with what she felt was surface level writing in her senior year; she felt her writing was merely serviceable. Tess' "point of departure" (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak, 2014) in writing was one of patient disinterest, as the expectations made of her could have been more challenging, and she saw herself as a writer who fulfilled academic requirements. But when I asked her what was most memorable about her First-Year Writing course, she told me that it was the class that stood out most in her memory from her first year, largely because every writing project taught her something new. In other words, years after the course, Tess recalled most that it exposed her to writing as a topic in and of itself (Wardle, Adler-Kassner, 2015), one that she had already known well, but about which she discovered she had more to learn (Rose, 2015).

In the spirit of full disclosure, I met Tess two years before the time of our interview, when she became a tutor in the University of Connecticut Writing Center, where I also worked. At the time of our interview, when I asked Tess about any specific writing projects, large or small, that she recalled from her First-Year Writing course, she mentioned her service-learning partnership with ConnPIRG and the report that she and her group were tasked with creating to report on how other universities were making use of solar power, straddling Deans' (2000) writing *for* and writing *with* the community paradigms much like Peter's activity. While Tess reflected on the challenges of writing one public text in a group of four, and the revision necessary to make a cohesive report, she also reflected on the social aspects of data gathering and research and the challenges inherent in that. In fact, Tess recalled being nervous about conducting the phone interviews with administrators from other universities necessary to gather the data for the report. She recalled that her professor did practice interviews with the class, going so far as to have students leave the room and come back in, acting out the interviews from beginning to end and giving feedback. In this case, her professor exposed the group to the social aspects of writing, allowing them to practice "rough draft" interviews in advance of the higher-stakes interviews they had planned. Even with all of this support, Tess recalled pacing back and forth before her first telephone interview and hoping the person on the other end of the line would not pick up. When the person *did* answer, she conducted the interview and, years later, recalled that doing that interview represents an instance of productive cognitive dissonance (Long, 2008) that allowed Tess to learn the social tools she needed to pursue the social action she already had the inclination to do.

Indeed, Tess was still involved with ConnPIRG at the time of our interview, making phone calls on behalf of ConnPIRG and presentations as a member of UConn's Mock Trial Society. As a matter of fact, Tess had expanded her involvement with ConnPIRG by her senior year.

> And I've done several things with my position. So UConnPIRG, although we are a nonpartisan, student-directed student advocacy group, we have several campaigns, so I volunteered on different campaigns under UConnPIRG. This

> includes obviously new voters project and affordable textbooks, but I've also kind of done a little bit of work with, like, zero waste and ABX, which is banning antibiotics in meat from like Subway, KFC.

It seemed Tess credited her service-learning experience with helping make this level of community involvement possible. From a college senior who recalled not feeling invested in her high school writing, the vivid memories of emotional and intellectual investment in research and writing for a purpose[2] seem significant. When I asked Tess whether she would recommend a service-learning component or something else for a First-Year Writing course, she responded with a personal reflection:

> I personally really like the service-learning activity, because it showcased academic writing to me in a place where the same skills that I applied to write that report, like I use now on a daily basis. And I think it was an exercise in skill building and confidence building for very practical things, like, how do you talk to somebody, how do you interview somebody, how do you take information that somebody gives you and make a persuasive report to prove to somebody else, so they should do something? [S]o that, like, persuasion, I think is important, and like purposeful. And I think having something real to do made things...not, I guess...make it more real, but make it, it had a purpose, because I knew that the report that I was going to be writing could have an actual effect somewhere one way or another. [A]nd it had implications beyond just the classroom, because we're talking about, like, the solar energy of a university. And we're a very large university, and we take up a lot of energy. And if our university was to make a commitment to either do solar energy, or like renewable energy, that would save so much energy.

In Tess' case, her commitments to social change were clear; she took the opportunity to talk about the good groups like ConnPIRG can do to effect social change in an interview where she was invited to talk almost exclusively about herself. It was clear that this commitment was intrinsic to Tess and not entirely a result of the service-learning class, but Tess did lay plain how the service-learning projects helped empower her to enact the changes she saw necessary, in effect giving her the knowledge to become a public writer. It is worth noting here that a student who did not enter a service-learning class with the inclination to engage in community action might not have taken the initiative to overcome anxieties and learn how to perform that action.

That is not to say, though, that Tess benefitted from the course only insofar as she learned ways to be a more effective citizen-writer. Her reflections on her serviceable writing in high school at the beginning of our interview stood in stark contrast with the more invested approach to reading and writing she spoke of later. For example, she noted reading Judith Butler as a specific learning experience.

> [T]he reading that impacted me the most had to be the Butler reading. And I remember I printed it out twice, because I printed it out once, and then I wrote all over it. And I didn't understand what I wrote on it, because I just, I didn't understand it. It was so difficult at the time. And so, I reprinted it and went through it so many times, just to understand the little pieces. I'm forgetting exactly which piece of her writing we were looking at. But I just know that that made me a better reader, because I had never read anything before that I just didn't understand. That was a very new experience to me.

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[2] Again, see Lunsford and Ede's (2012) commentary on collaboration and ownership of texts.

Tess told me that learning to annotate had proven valuable while reading and writing for her other classes, and that learning to encounter a text she did not understand at first was something missing from her high school experience. She also reported paying specific attention to concision while writing, in part because her professor made that a primary focus in writing feedback, but also because she found it necessary in crafting public texts for ConnPIRG and the Mock Trial Society. While these are nameable and discrete writing skills Tess brought with her to new contexts, they transferred to less academic spaces as habits of mind (Sullivan, 2014; Bacon, 1999) that Tess saw valuable and broadly applicable.

I spoke with Tess months after our interview, and she had accepted a full-time position with ConnPIRG to start after her graduation from UConn. So not only is Tess an example of a service-learner who sustained a relationship with her service-learning partner, she is an example of one who made a career out of that partnership.

Service-Learning “Light”: Spring 2019:

Though the sample size is small, the cases of Peter and Tess show that the benefits of service-learning, as I describe them, can be achieved remotely. However, their service-learning partnerships were built as part of a more traditional, in-person service-learning class. Not long before COVID-19, I taught an upper-division rhetoric course for pre-service teachers in which students partnered with high school students from a local school to mentor them on their writing. Though I physically visited the school to meet with the teacher and introduce myself to the students, there was no contact between my students and the high school students due to security concerns. My students did their mentoring through email. The high school teacher and I had access to all correspondence, so we could each track our own students to make sure they were keeping up with their obligations and that discourse remained appropriate. Because of this, we noticed that often, high school students did not reach out to or respond to the pre-service teachers in my class.

This proved a learning experience regardless of the high school students’ tepid interest. The pre-service teachers were surprised that students would not take any and all assistance, but as pre-service teachers preparing to enter a Master’s in Education program, they anticipated that students would approach education with the same elan as they did. But not every high school student planned to attend college, let alone pursue an advanced degree, and many teachers learn this reality only after they enter the classroom. The semester-long project for the in-service teachers was to draft a literacy narrative. We began the semester with reflections on what it means to be literate and how their education thus far had prepared them for their careers. As the semester went on, though, and as the in-service teachers had more contact with their mentees, the narratives became more complex, and the writers tended to acknowledge that literacy emerges in sporadic and uneven ways, and people pursue literacy depending on their prior knowledge and values. Here, future teachers learned a more complex notion of literacy as well as reflected on their own circuitous and unexpected paths to their own literacy.

Discussion

Online service-learning can sponsor public literacy as well as in-person service-learning. Again, while the two student case studies above did not come from a strictly online service-learning class, their activities migrate readily to online venues. While engaging in such activities, Peter and Tess enjoyed sponsorship in their public writing. They also both shared the inclination to write publicly; they enrolled in a service-learning course knowing that their semester’s work

would involve community engagement and writing. But their outcomes were different. Peter's relationship with ConnPIRG ended with the completion of the semester. Tess, on the other hand, not only continued her partnership with ConnPIRG but she ultimately made a career out of advocating for solar power. Of course, they entered the class as different people with different "point[s] of departure" (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak, 2014), and that could very well explain the differences in their continued partnerships. Those starting points could also explain why Peter reported little anxiety when reflecting on his service-learning experience, while Tess recalled that anxiety intensely. But I propose another interpretation. Peter enjoyed sponsorship in community literacy and action from his family, and his comfort with his ConnPIRG activities can stem from the sponsorship he received at home from his family business's partnership with a local animal shelter and his own year-round activities there.

Tess did not report that sort of sponsorship. She had grown tired of writing for her teachers and professors, and when she arrived at college, she sought ways to make that writing matter. She overcame the anxiety of calling a statewide organization as a first-year college student in order to give her writing meaning, and she did so under the sponsorship and direction of her professor. Both of these students had an inclination to public or community action, and while Peter had that inclination satisfied by his work with animals, Tess did not; she had to seek it out elsewhere. But regardless of whether she found that sponsorship in or outside of college, she took advantage of that sponsorship and not only found an arena in which to write for social change, but she also excelled at it.

And the pre-service teachers enjoyed a sponsorship they had not anticipated. For many new teachers, a lack of student engagement can prove both frustrating and baffling. Those who self-select to enter teaching often do so because they like to learn, and those who succeed often do so because they have sponsorship in their studies enough to know how to find help when needed. But that sponsorship is contingent on a community of learning, be it from family, friends, or engaged teachers, and not all students enjoy such a community or plan on continuing their studies beyond high school. These pre-service teachers were exposed to that reality with the sponsorship of their professor to listen to and contextualize their frustrations.

Conclusion

Student and community engagement in the education of citizen-writers remans critically important after COVID-19 because the problems that existed before the pandemic remain, and isolation will not cure them. The findings I've presented here indicate that even without in-person contact, students can still enjoy public writing experiences and sponsorship that teach them to make informed decisions about their writing based on the purposes of writing tasks rather than rely on forms and ways of writing that have always worked for them in the past.

And service-learning specifically, regardless of whether or not it takes place in person, has the potential to complicate literacy sponsorship in ways that can mitigate its risks by introducing multiple stakeholders who sponsor writing and rhetorical development in different ways and with different ends in mind. In the traditional model of the literacy sponsor, one-on-one conflicts can arise, and the sponsor has the authority. But when multiple sponsors of literacy work together in a reciprocal relationship that decentralizes the authority of the instructor, writing objectives can take a front seat to final grades. Ultimately, both the instructor and students work towards the interests of their community partners.

And this is the side of any community-university partnership over which university stakeholders have control. We cannot dictate the investment of community organizations in

university-community partnerships because communities and organizations have their own needs. We must respect their right to decide for themselves how to make use of these partnerships should they decide to enter them. We can, however, decide to take opportunities to partner with community organizations and teach students not only cultural competence and the skills needed to make change, but also how to navigate complex writing demands for real-world scenarios that have consequences beyond a final grade.

While I write this, the COVID-19 pandemic is roughly two years old and still changing. In this time, my colleagues and I have learned a lot about teaching online, but I have not had the means or brass to attempt a service-learning course. This leaves me in a double-bind: I refuse to repay the generosity of community organizations or members with increased risk of COVID-19, but I remain convinced that students can benefit from service-learning experiences especially now, when we have such precious little contact with one another. Since the pandemic hit, students in my "traditional," non-service-learning courses have expressed their loneliness, and their enthusiasm for small activities like writing breakout groups and workshops suggest that they want to connect. Also, it seems foolhardy to push service-learning in order to generate data before I've had a chance to plan and plan well. But, ironically, the potential difficulty of students' access to community organizations proved an important consideration in service-learning before COVID-19, and thus, there exist data to help in that planning. Tess and Peter both engaged in community activity that does not require in-person contact. In fact, Tess' recollection of the anxiety she felt when preparing to make a phone call on behalf of ConnPIRG suggests that this was a valuable, albeit remote, learning experience in public rhetoric. Similarly, the pre-service teachers in my upper-level rhetoric course gained valuable experience from their online relationships with high school students, even if one of their lessons was that students will not always take advantage of writing support. It is also important to consider that these pre-service teachers may or may not have had experience with online learning before, and in my class, they practiced managing online learning, even if limited to coaching students via email on their writing. Within a year of taking my course, these pre-service teachers were learning and (hopefully) teaching almost if not entirely online. Service-learning exposes students to the unexpected, and that is a good thing, because the unexpected is always around the corner.

The data exists. Even if the global context in which we have to evaluate that data has changed and will continue to change, it is possible to plan for what community engagement and more specifically, service-learning, can look like for writing courses in years to come. In the year before the pandemic, Linda Flower (2020) contributed a piece to *Reflections: A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric* to help honor the journal's twentieth year. Flower examines the expansion of the discourse surrounding community engagement in writing studies to begin to articulate the social contributions community engagement has brought with it as well as upholding those changes. This could seem slippery, considering even what we call community engagement has changed over the years as Flower and others have cultivated this discourse. But the point is not to "catch" community engagement once and for all, but rather to continue to let it evolve depending on our long and short-term goals. But Flower does lay one thing plain: whether we inquire of our discipline or writers inquire of their craft, "[i]nquiry has its own unexpected outcomes" (P. 64). I hope that this inquiry into how to safely and mindfully combine pedagogy, scholarship, and social action continues to inform how we as university stakeholders attempt to bridge the divides between universities and communities.

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