

When Things Fall Apart: “Professionalism” and Service-Learning

Chere Peguesse
Valdosta State University

In English Studies, particularly in composition, part of the process of claiming theoretical sophistication is to reject what seems simplistic and mundane. The drudgery of teaching writing has been that mundane work, and it has been clearly distinguished from teaching literature. Teaching writing is “vocational.” Teaching literature is “theoretical.” In response to this rejection of teaching writing, Patricia Bizzell points out that “...writing teachers have traditionally responded to this denigration by defiantly embracing it—ever a tactic of the oppressed—and announcing their pride in their preoccupation with pedagogy” (Dobrin 1). What happens in this circumstance is the odd separation of theory from practice, and so within composition studies there is both theory-hope and theory-dread.

As antidote to the theory/practice split, many writing teachers have turned to a service-learning pedagogy, which is “a hands-on approach that uses community service as a vehicle for teaching specific course-based skills and strategies” (Bowden and Scott 2). Students learn theory first, and then apply it in “live” situations with real organizations that have real problems and needs. In particular, service-learning claims the ethical goal of creating social and educational change based on connection, empathy, and responsibility. Sounds great, yes. Hard to implement, yes. Does it work? Well, that depends on many variables. In this article, the variable of our self-perceptions as “professionals” is crucial. In fact, scholars in English Studies have debated about what it means to

“professionalize” ethically for many decades. A service-learning pedagogy claims to ground students in an ethics of care and concern for others so that as they become professionals themselves, those values will revitalize the ethical goal of creating social and educational change rather than self-interest and exclusivity. These are certainly worthy goals, but two of my experiences teaching service-learning reveal how self-interest and community activism can *both* be enacted.

Becoming Professional: Composition’s Growing Pains

Composition studies has struggled with theory-hope and theory-dread. Theory-hope means that theory can both enrich our teaching practice *and* let us claim academic legitimacy. Theory-dread means that our overemphasis on theory as a legitimating factor undermines—even belittles—our teaching practice. Scholars such as Richard Ohmann, Jasper Neel, Susan Miller, Paulo Friere, and Peter Elbow have written extensively about the field of composition’s growing pains as a legitimate, academic specialty—becoming “professional.”

Richard Ohmann began the debate about the ethics of professionalization for English Studies in 1976 with his book, *English in America*. Ohmann observes that professionals of most fields—including law, medicine, and business—convince the public of their value through established conventions:

- * They offer something vital society needs
- * They offer it in a way that is detached and objective
- * They know better than their clients what ails them or their affairs

* Their expertise comes from a body of theory and not just practice or hands-on experience

* They have had long training to master skills and knowledge (235).

These conventions lend themselves to a "natural" hierarchy that simultaneously serves the public in the above ways and conspires against it (209). Professional ideology (as outlined above) offers the comfort of identifying the professional's own welfare with that of society while simultaneously claiming to be independent of and above the social matrix. Professionalization, then, whether for business or academics, is a way of escaping the powerlessness of ordinary work and the worst rigors of competition in industrialist capitalist society (251). As Ohmann sees it, "part of our function is to sort out the elites and domesticate the rest" (231).

In the academic world, professionalization is the process by which a field and/or an individual are officially, formally recognized as expert. One becomes a professional scholar by intense study, by joining professional organizations, by publishing research, and by gaining recognition through awards, fellowships, and community service. Ohmann argues that becoming a professional in English Studies is less about power and rank and more about status (215). Particularly in English, one assumption is that the scholar does not move from a position of subordination to one of command; rather, s/he moves upward in distinction through accomplishments and awards (216, 236). So what's wrong with that? Well, Ohmann and others argue that an emphasis on status promotes a professionalism grounded in self-interest and exclusivity. This professionalism perpetuates oppressive social arrangements that lock us into constraining dualisms such as high/low,

theory/practice, male/female, teacher/student. It is a professionalism we academics don't admit to because it sounds like we are a *business*, not the more lofty and inherently more "ethical" haven of learning and scholarship we think we represent.

Susan Miller elaborates on these dualisms. Approaching it from a feminist perspective, Miller argues that professionalization in composition creates a high/low dichotomy, which in turn creates a "new grotesque" by separating from an "objectionable" entity: mere teaching (140). "Mere teaching" is the grunt work better suited to those in training—large numbers of graduate students in many cases—rather than professors. Jasper Neel observes that the professionalization process makes it easy to lose an ear for human discourse—that which reveals the position from which one speaks with its attendant emotional, political, cultural and religious orientations—and to speak solely to those within the charmed circle (121). Like Susan Miller, Neel is keenly aware of the exclusive nature of much academic discourse. Drawing on ancient Greek history, he argues that the emergence of writing and its association with the intellectual aristocracy engendered an exclusive discourse that grew in opposition to democracy. Professional, academic discourse offered the expertise of a single knower, speaking from a position grounded in the ideas of universal Truth, hierarchy, and unequal power relations as divine providence (109).

In 1990 Paulo Friere, a Brazilian educator who gained wide recognition for his work with peasants, argued that then-standard educational practices relied on the "banking method": teachers (the single knowers) deposit knowledge into the empty heads of students. To undermine this model, Friere proposed we start with what *students*

know, and assume that they know a lot. His goal was to empower peasants through education, thereby liberating them from the oppressive political and educational systems in which they lived. “Libratory and Critical Pedagogy” became a major school of thought in American English Studies, and classroom strategies such as peer review, personal narrative, group work, and community service are now standard classroom strategies that emerged from Friere’s work and scholarship. Libratory and Critical Pedagogy has an overtly leftist goal: to empower students across socioeconomic levels to become agents of educational and social change. To become professional in this scheme is to become what Antonio Gramsci—an Italian Marxist intellectual who was jailed for his beliefs—called an “organic intellectual”: a person who becomes an intellectual not for status, but in order to return to the community to share knowledge and expertise so as to create connections and opportunities for others. Service-learning pedagogy emerged from this school of thought, as well.

Service-Learning and the Ethics of Professionalism

I have two service-learning stories that will upset the apparent opposition between professionalization as self-interested and repressive and professionalization as activism and connection. I believe these stories also demonstrate how much our values, desires, and concerns align with those of our students.

All kinds of composition courses use service-learning, but it works particularly well in business and technical writing courses. In service-learning, students enter into a reciprocal relationship with a local organization in order to produce writing that

benefits that organization. The writing project may involve creating a brochure or website, or perhaps writing a grant, publicity materials, or mission statements. Service-learning is a way for students to see how their writing has real-world impact that involves making critical decisions about audience, purpose, and style. It is an approach in which the student can assume that his/her fate is bound up with that of their group as well as the organization’s.

In one of my business writing courses, a team of three students chose to design an organ donation brochure for my university’s Health and Wellness Center. Since they had already done the research on organ donation for another class, they assumed it would be an easy project. However, their relationship with the director of the center pushed them to examine the ethics involved in this deceptively simple project.

To evaluate their work, the team chose the director of our Wellness Center who had a Ph.D. in nutrition. Her critique of their brochure upset the team members—not because it was harsh—but because they had to reconsider their assumption that the document was done. For example, the caption on the front of the brochure read, “Be A Hero: Save a Life” in bold red and black letters. Below this was an icon of a stylized pumping heart. The director pointed out that some people choose not to donate their organs for religious or other valid reasons. The caption implied that those people couldn’t be considered heroic, and the wording might offend others because it sounded preachy. The team brought the director’s written critique to me and asked me if they could switch outside reviewers. When I asked them why, they said that the director’s evaluation was unfair. Again I asked why. They realized that “because she didn’t like it and we would have to do it

over” wasn’t a valid answer, and I never had to say a word. Rather, I got excited that they wisely picked someone who took a real and critical interest in their fine work. I was sure that the director’s critique would help them improve the document so that it satisfied the Wellness Center’s needs.

This is part of what service-learning is all about: putting aside one’s own agenda and listening carefully to a contact person’s needs and then attempting to fulfill those needs. These students recognized the shift in emphasis only because they were confronted with the complexities of accurately identifying and satisfying several audiences. They revised their brochure four more times, submitting it each time to the director. The director’s critiques also made these students rethink their own positions regarding organ donation. Two of the women realized that they themselves would not want to donate their organs even though they supported the idea in general. In redesigning the brochure, they realized that they were not a part of its audience. It became an ethical dilemma for them to persuade others to do something they could not bring themselves to do. The issue remained unresolved by the end of the project, but the fact that it made these students aware of the implications of their design and message cannot be overvalued in my mind.

When the Project Doesn’t Empower

The above team’s experience is one that I hope all my students will have. Realistically, it simply doesn’t happen with all service-learning projects. Another team, for example, did not have this experience of self-awareness and reciprocity. The problem was not with this other team’s relationship with the sponsoring organization, but among the group members. The brochure team above was composed of

three young women, all members of the same sorority, all the same age, race, and socio-economic class. I believe that homogeneity enabled that group to focus and reflect on their own ethics and values in designing the brochure. The other group, however, could only focus on getting the job done in a Let’s-Get-this-Over-With way. Although my goals for self-reflection and respect for diversity and community were not attained by this second group, we all did learn something very valuable about professionalism—as the following story demonstrates.

In all my business writing courses, I ask students to analyze workplace culture, image, documents, and ethics, and to consider the impact of technology on these elements. They do this by analyzing scholarly articles on the critique of technology. The final assignment is a team project designed to enact those analytical skills. One of the team project options is to conduct a usability test for a product such as an interactive web page. The assignment includes a letter of inquiry, a proposal, progress reports, and a final recommendation report that is presented to the class for critique and refinement. Ultimately the recommendation is delivered to the designers/creators of the tested product.

Conducting a usability test has several advantages, particularly as it supports an ethics-based professionalism. First, usability tests support an ethical approach to a marketplace culture by foregrounding human needs and safety, which is in line with the libratory and critical pedagogical approach. This kind of service-learning experience should anchor students in the human and *humane* side of technological development. Second, a well-planned and executed usability test would be something for the students to highlight on

their résumés, fulfilling their self-interested needs for a job. Thus, the courses have a practical, skills-based objective, as well as a critical thinking, ethics-based objective.

To fulfill the ethics objective in this particular course, one of the articles we read was “The Ethic of Expediency” by Steven B. Katz. The article is a philosophical critique of an attitude toward technology that relies on what is of *advantage* rather than what is *just*. Katz uses a vivid example: the Nazi invention of trucks modified to gas Jewish prisoners, and he begins with a memo between Nazi officers that refers to the prisoners only as “load.” My objective in having students read this and similar articles was to reinforce a humane approach to the technology they were using. I had hoped that this approach would help students be empathetic to each other as well as to their clients/organizations. As the teams formed, however, three students who chose each other were as unsuited to work together as any I had coached before.

This particular team might be read as one small cross-section of our national make-up. Cliff,¹ a fraternity member in his twenties, came from a wealthy white family and was planning to go into the family’s accounting business. Marina, a woman of Italian descent from a working-class neighborhood in New York City, was a 70 year old aerobics instructor returning to school “for fun.” Juan, Mexican American, was a pre-law student in his mid-forties and a first-generation college student; he came from a large, poor family.

At week three of the assignment, this group still had not agreed upon a project. Luckily, another team who was designing a website for another organization invited Cliff, Marina, and Juan to conduct a

usability test of their site. As they formulated a plan, their weaknesses began to surface and create communication problems among the three. It seemed that the more they worked with each other, the less they identified with each other. For example, Marina tried to stab Cliff with her pencil when he wrote on her draft of a memo. She didn’t understand that she could make changes to the draft on the computer, and thought that Cliff was “marring” her only copy. Juan, the most emotionally mature of the group, often worked on his own while Cliff and Marina argued. However, they did settle on the roles they would play: Cliff was designated the writer; Marina was the scheduling person; and Juan obtained the equipment. All three conducted the usability test, but by week five, they were not speaking to each other. I got emails, phone calls, and especially office visits separately from all three. My stance was to encourage them to work out their personal differences enough to get the project done. I decided that the less I got involved, the better chance they would have to find a way to complete the project.

By week seven, the progress reports I required in writing never materialized. I hadn’t heard from them, and I remember wondering if they had decided to give up and drop the class. On the day of final presentations, I had invited other instructors to attend who knew about this group’s interesting make-up, and I had warned them that anything might happen. This team surprised everyone in the room.

The team arrived slightly behind schedule, but well-prepared. Juan presented me with the final recommendation report, spiral-bound and slick looking, and then all three sat in different places around the room. When it was time for them to present, each took turns speaking about his / her part in the project, careful not to look at each other,

¹ All names have been changed.

reference each other, or speak to each other. I admit I was fascinated. Perhaps the most surprising part of this presentation were the recommendations themselves: the designers of the tested website were in the room, and were pleased with the results of the test, which revealed places for re-design that would make the page more easily navigable. Juan, the quietest of the group, enthusiastically fielded question after question from students about how they set up the test, who their participants were, what problems they ran into, etc. None of the team members mentioned the arguing and miscommunication they suffered. Overall, I was impressed with how they had pulled themselves together. Nevertheless, something nagged at me about how, for this particular team, the ethics-based goal of the course went unfulfilled. I imagine that the experience soured them for future course-related team projects, which would perhaps make it difficult for them to get ahead had they had a successful team experience. There's no way for me to know how their experiences in my course might affect their careers, but I surmise that the self-interested, skills-based professionalism they demonstrated held the most sway.

Russel Durst's research on the conflict between student and instructor expectations is revealing here. Durst found that students' views and approaches to writing tended to be pragmatic: they are career oriented, see writing as difficult but necessary for success, and are politically disengaged. In other words, students' views reflect the firmly rooted, pragmatic, careerist, hands-on American work philosophy. On the other hand, teachers' views and approaches to writing tend to be ideological: they are interested in self-awareness, political engagement, and reflection. They wish students to challenge and complicate the status quo. Teachers

believe pragmatism is something to overcome, and that students sell themselves short by being grade-obsessed and careerist. Students see teachers as negative, pessimistic, and accusatory, which incites various strategies of resistance. Yet, as Durst points out, students' values are not completely opposed to our own: we all have desires for financial security. We all benefit from the work of architects, artists, engineers, lawyers, computer scientists, etc., and we all have some desire to contribute to a socially just world.

So how do we help students with major conflicts deal with each other professionally, and deal with the organization or client for whom they work? The professionalism that advocates distance and self-preservation was perhaps the only way for this particular group to get through their project. In their presentation, the usability test team assumed a professional mantle of distance; they were detached and objective. The theme that ran through their final reflections was that, while they thought the project valuable (only Juan mentioned any specifics about problem solving), they "just wanted to get the project over with." They did, ultimately, please the website designers, but remained ambivalent toward each other and toward the project.

I realized my approach to the class reflected the ideological goals Durst observes about teachers in his study by having them read about business ethics, talking about ethical behavior in class, and how miscommunications due to rush jobs can create disaster, as it did with the 1991 shuttle explosion, which was caused by a memo that did not forefront a major mechanical flaw and therefore went unnoticed. But for this team, my ideological goals conflicted with their need to get the grade. No amount of theory was helping them get their work done. For this team, age,

race, and cultural background created the conflict; the final recommendation and oral presentation, however, masked these differences. The team members came away with a finished product, but their basic prejudices remained intact. Cliff, for example, complained consistently that he “couldn’t work with these people. One is too old and one is illiterate.” Marina complained that Cliff was too bossy and impatient, and kept trying to “take over” the whole project. Juan remained silent. Although I wish these students had gotten past these differences, their process and product *does* mirror what can happen in the business world, where it’s good to get along, but ultimately, it’s the product that counts most. These students could have given up. They could have dropped the class. They could have presented the website designers with poor results, but the sense of professionalism that emphasizes pragmatism, exclusion, and objectivity created a space for this team to finish with a viable product. The project illuminates, then, how we might re-imagine a professionalism and a pedagogy that can encompass conflict as much as success.

Bruce Robbins offers a corrective vision that further complicates and enriches what it means to professionalize. In *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture*, Robbins examines the deradicalization of intellectuals as they have become increasingly tied to the professions. Yet the term *professionalism*, Robbins agrees, “is a source of ambiguity, an ethical and political problem” (36), but he questions the “knee-jerk” response to professionalism as the systematic exclusion of the public (45). Instead, he argues, the creation of a profession arises out of new social customs that had been considered “natural” (such as midwifery), and for better or worse, “opened them up to a new consciousness of

alternatives, to a new possibility of choice” (50). For example, midwives were replaced by the specialized profession of Obstetrics. Yet society and professionals exist in a dynamic relationship that can encompass dual loyalties to professionalism and activism. Robbins cites social workers as models: they do not see that becoming more professionalized means becoming less activist oriented. Robbins explains,

To protect the state is to protect your job. In a routine sort of paradox, this is one thing social workers do, or fail to do, when they attempt to speak up for clients and against the state. All of this is compatible with self-interest. All of it is arguably in the interests of the clients as well. Both state and profession exist in an organic dynamic relation to a political constituency. (220)

In other words, social workers’ self-interest is served in protecting their jobs by representing clients’ self-interest to the state. For Cliff, Marina and Juan, the deep potentially crippling differences caused by the age, gender, and racial gaps were obstacles they overcame in service to their clients; this signals the kind of dedication and resolve they needed to professionalize. At the same time, this team protected its own self-interest to get a good grade. The term *professionalism*, then, can mean both exclusivity and connection, both colonization and activism.

Embracing the contraries, as Peter Elbow argued in 1981, is an inherent part of teaching:

My argument is that good teaching seems a struggle because it calls on skills or mentalities that are actually contrary to each other and thus tend to interfere with each other. Two conflicting mentalities needed for good teaching stem from two

conflicting obligations inherent in the job. (54)

Our conflicting obligations are those we feel to students, who count on us as coaches, and those we owe to institutions and the public, who count on us to judge student work acceptable for civic life. Service-learning, for me, clarifies how these “contrary” perceptions of professionalism enhance each other because students, in their work with the public, have someone depending on them and whose direct feedback shapes them in a way a teacher in a classroom cannot. If there had not been web designers waiting for results, the probability that these students might fail the project would have increased. And if there were not several models of professional behavior and values from which these student drew—even though some models were ones I don’t usually advocate—they might have given up.

Lisa Ede observes this about our practices: “The question of whether a particular practice is enabling or oppressive, enlightening or limiting, is a situated question, one that we must enact rather than decide once and for all” (130). This statement reminds me of something my favorite graduate school professor, Tilly Warnock, told me: “Revision is a life skill.” The kinds of problems that arose in these two stories show that a wide variety of experiences—good and bad—can be a valuable lessons for both teachers and students as we all work at revising the rough drafts of our lives.

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Contributor's Note

Chere Peguesse is an associate professor of English and Interim Director of the Academic Success Center, a centralized peer tutoring center at Valdosta State University. She has a book chapter titled "National Writing Project Site Directors as WPAs" forthcoming in *The Promise and Peril of Writing Program Administrators*. Eds. Theresa Enos and Shane Borrowman. Parlor P, May 2006.