

Beyond the Classroom Border:

Student Writing in Service-Learning Partnerships



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Abstract: The recently adopted TEKS for English I-IV that will be implemented in 2020-2021 require students to write for a variety of purposes and audiences, to practice the writing process, and to engage in reflective writing. These standards can be difficult to meet when literacy instruction is confined to classroom borders, where students often write only for the teacher, using a limited set of composing processes, without opportunities for written reflection. One type of composition pedagogy that expands literacy instruction beyond classroom borders and immerses students in authentic rhetorical situations is service learning. In this article, the authors describe how service-learning projects in which students write for community partners allow students to write for external audiences, in real-world genres, employing complex composing processes, with ample opportunities for deep reflection. They also describe the experiences of a group of English II students who partnered with their local Department of Public Safety to write public service announcements that were published on the Department's Twitter feed. The authors hope to inspire other ELA teachers in Texas to incorporate service learning into their courses as a way of extending literacy instruction beyond classroom borders.

Keywords: service learning, TEKS, audience, writing process, reflective writing

In asking presenters and attendees to think “beyond borders,” the 2019 TCTELA conference theme challenged English language arts (ELA) professionals to reexamine entrenched concepts that may limit the reach of literacy instruction. For example, conventional descriptions of “students” may focus on white, US-born, English-speaking, middle-class students who meet achievement standards and neglect students of different races, nationalities, language backgrounds, socioeconomic levels, or achievement statuses. Traditional definitions of “literacy” may direct our attention toward the reading and writing of print-based texts and away from complex engagement with a variety of symbol systems that include visuals, technology, and numbers. As the many conference presentations made clear, and as the articles in this issue confirm, we must be willing to cross the borders of established thinking if we are to account for “the many faces of literacy in Texas.”

In terms of writing instruction, one of the borders we must cross is that which delimits the classroom itself. If students write only on traditional academic subjects, in response to assignments designed by and intended for the teacher, they are unlikely to develop the rhetorical awareness and adaptability that 21st century literacy demands. Indeed, the revised Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) (TEA, 2017) for English I-IV imply that writing instruction should expand beyond classroom borders in asking students to “plan a piece of writing appropriate for various purposes and audiences” and “publish written work for appropriate audiences” (see Composition standards 9A and 9E). Similarly, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (2013) asserts that 21st century literacies require students to “design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes” and to master literacy skills that are “multiple, dynamic, and malleable” (para 3). As these standards make clear, we need to rethink literacy instruction that is confined to classroom borders.

How can ELA teachers overcome the isolation of traditional classroom structures and get students to write beyond classroom borders? Certainly, we can ask students to write in multiple genres, using various media, on topics not traditionally considered academic. We can also simulate different purposes and audiences by asking students to imagine themselves in a variety of rhetorical situations. This latter technique is effective as far as it goes, but it also runs the risk of seeming like an elaborate game of pretend in which students act out a role in a performance only the teacher will see for the sole purpose of earning a grade. The only established composition pedagogy that actually gets students out of the classroom and writing for audiences unaffiliated with school is service learning.

In this article, we explain how adding a service-learning component to ELA classes can help students think beyond the classroom and, in the process, meet three key standards of the revised TEKS: (1) write for various audiences and in various genres, (2) engage in authentic writing processes, and (3) practice reflective writing. In order to illustrate what a service-learning partnership looks like, we also share the experiences of a group of students who partnered with the Department of Public Safety (DPS) in the city of Southlake to produce communications for the Department's Twitter feed. We hope to inspire other Texas teachers to form similar service-learning partnerships as a way to extend literacy instruction beyond classroom borders.¹

Audience and Genre

The TEKS for English I-IV that were adopted in 2017 and will be implemented in the 2020-2021 school year group composition standards under two main headings: writing process and genres (see Composition standards 9 and 10). We might think of the writing process standards as a description of *how* students should be writing and the genres standards as a description of *what* students should be writing. In terms of writing for audiences, however, the writing process standards are somewhat at odds with the genres standards. In the final stage of the writing process, students are expected to “publish written work for appropriate audiences,” but teachers—at least in their *roles* as teachers—cannot be the appropriate audience for *any* of the required genres (literary texts, informational texts, argumentative texts, and correspondence in English I-IV, with literary analysis and rhetorical analysis added for English III and IV). Obviously, people who make their livings as teachers can also be part of the intended audience for texts written in the genres listed above, but they cannot be both teachers and, say, readers of a literary journal *at the same time*. This claim may sound strange on its face, but it makes sense in light of what the term “genre” entails.

In an article that has become one of the most oft-cited in rhetoric and composition scholarship, Carolyn Miller (1984) argues that a definition of genre “must not be centered on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (p. 151). In other words, a text does not belong in a certain genre category based on its formal characteristics but rather on the social action it performs. According to Miller, a genre is a “typified rhetorical action” (p. 151) that “acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose” (p. 163). This is why people cannot be teachers at the same time they are the intended audience for a literary journal. Their DNA remains the same, but their social roles as teachers are different from their roles as readers of a literary journal.

¹It is beyond the scope of this article to provide instructions for how to plan, implement, and maintain service-learning partnerships. Please see the list of resources for materials that provide step-by-step guidance for K-12 service-learning projects.

What this means is that when we teach students to write in the genres required by the TEKS (2017), all of which perform actions in social contexts outside the classroom, we cannot at the same time teach them to “publish written work for appropriate audiences,” simply because teachers are not the appropriate audiences for these genres. In fact, according to Miller's (1984) definition of genre, what the TEKS call genres are not genres at all but rather *forms*. Strictly speaking, the only genres students can practice in school are those, like the five-paragraph essay, that exist only in school, for the purpose of making school happen. For students to practice the genres listed in the TEKS, they would need to get outside the classroom and into the social contexts in which those genres perform meaningful actions.

Unfortunately, we are severely limited in our capacity to place students in the sorts of social contexts in which they could practice genres authentically. After all, we cannot force our students to find jobs in which they write informational texts like business reports nor can we require students to publish their argumentative texts in the opinion section of the local newspaper. In most cases, we must settle for asking students to practice conventional forms of genres in hypothetical, rhetorical situations. This does not mean, however, that we must give up on the TEKS (2017) requirement that students “publish written work for appropriate audiences.” In service-learning partnerships such as the one described here, students write not for the teacher but for community partners, based on those partners' needs and expectations. As it happens, sometimes these partnerships require that students write in the very genres that the TEKS requires.

Student Experiences: Audience and Genre

As part of their work in English II, students at Southlake Carroll High School partnered with a number of community organizations in the city of Southlake and surrounding areas. The project comprised six classes, divided into more than 40 small groups, each group partnering with a different organization. The group of students we profile here partnered with the Southlake DPS. This group met with a public information officer to determine how the students could best meet the Department's needs, and both parties agreed that the students would compose a series of tweets to be published on the Department's popular Twitter feed. One series of tweets would urge followers not to use their phones while driving, while another series of tweets would ask followers to turn off their sprinklers in freezing conditions.

This task required students to write “for various purposes and audiences” (TEA, 2017, see Composition standard 9A) in a manner that was far more authentic than writing exercises completed solely for a teacher. For example, these students learned that a single writing task can serve various purposes and target various audiences *simultaneously*. On one level, students were writing for the public information officer himself, and their purpose was to convince him that the tone, style, and content of their tweets warranted publication on the DPS Twitter feed. At the same time, the only way students could satisfy the officer's expectations was to compose tweets that would grab the attention of the feed's more than 12,000 followers and convince them to take action. The students were successful in achieving their first purpose, and consequently, their tweets appeared on the DPS twitter feed, thus meeting the TEKS requirement to “publish written work for appropriate audiences.”

These students also learned an important lesson about genre that is difficult to replicate in academic assignments that attempt to simulate discrete genres. Namely, the “recurrent rhetorical situation” (Miller, 1984, p. 163) they encountered required them to write in two genres

at the same time: informational texts and argumentative texts. Their tweets were informational in that they conveyed the hazards of phone use while driving and the use of sprinklers in freezing conditions, thus informing readers of dangers or, perhaps more likely, reminding them of dangers of which they were already aware. At the same time, students were clearly making an argument in their attempts to persuade readers to take specific actions. When genres are described theoretically, the temptation is to treat them as mutually exclusive, as occurs when the TEKS treats the writing of informational texts and the writing of argumentative texts as distinct standards. In practice, texts that respond to authentic rhetorical situations often mix elements associated with different genres, which is a difficult lesson for students to learn unless they experience first-hand the exigencies of real-world writing.

The Writing Process

In addition to requiring students to publish their work for appropriate audiences, the revised TEKS also ask students in English I-IV to engage in the conventional stages of the writing process: planning, drafting, revising, and editing. As students practice taking a piece of writing through this process, they learn that a writing project takes time, that it progresses in stages, and that different stages require different skills. These are valuable lessons, to be sure, but the writing process as described in the TEKS is incomplete in that it fails to account for “post-process” theory, a body of composition scholarship that sharply criticizes the way the writing process is usually taught in schools. Below we discuss two main criticisms of the writing process that have emerged from post-process scholarship and explain how service learning, by requiring students to cross classroom borders, addresses these criticisms and fosters more authentic composing processes.

First, post-process theorists criticize process pedagogy on the grounds that it depicts writing as a private, solitary act. The process movement in composition derived in part from cognitive models of composing that represent the mind of the writer as something like a computer program (Anson, 2014). When confronted with a writing task, this mind, if properly trained, can work autonomously by following a standard set of procedures that will result in the production of a successful written product. Such models are flawed, according to post-process theorists, because, as Thomas Kent (1999) argues, “the writing act, as a kind of communicative interaction, automatically includes other language users, as well as the writer” (p. 1). In other words, writing is always already social, and thus models of composing that represent the writer’s mind as an isolated, private, problem-solving machine inevitably distort the very activity they mean to represent. Some post-process theorists go so far as to say that since language is a social construction, language use can never be private and that “we could not write at all if it were not for other language users and a world we share with others” (p. 1). According to this line of thinking, the writing process as it is commonly taught fails to account for the essentially social nature of writing because it fails to portray writing as an act of communication at all. Instead, writing is taught as a procedure for constructing a verbal artifact, not unlike a piece of code that a student might write in a computer science class. The teacher is there to examine the artifact, to determine whether it works, to assign it a grade, but at no point does the piece of writing genuinely *communicate* with other human beings for authentic purposes. Such communication would require the piece of writing to serve a purpose beyond simply demonstrating mastery of a skill—it would require that writing be as meaningful, purposeful, and social as the messages Carroll students published on the Southlake DPS Twitter feed.

Second, post-process theorists argue that there is no such thing as

the writing process at all, but rather countless writing processes that countless writers undertake in countless situations. As Kent (1999) puts it, post-process theory “endorses the fundamental idea that no codifiable or *generalizable* writing process exists or could exist” (p. 1). When we require students to “use the writing process” (TEA, 2017, see Composition standard 9), as the TEKS instructs us to do, we tacitly endorse the false claim that successful writing always proceeds according to a fixed series of identifiable stages. And when we require all students to proceed through these stages, we impose a single process upon them that may not be the most productive for all students. Any writing teacher who has required students to submit process materials, only to discover later that some students completed pre-writing materials well after they had begun drafting, or manufactured a “rough draft” after completing a final draft, can attest to the fact that a one-size-fits-all approach to the writing process does not meet the needs of all students. Of course, students are in school to grow, and so it is perfectly reasonable to force them out of their comfort zones and ask them to try out different writing processes that may at first seem unnatural to them. Even the most hardened post-process theorists concede that students should experiment with different processes in order to find what works for them. The problem lies not in teaching writing *processes* but in teaching a monolithic writing process that fails to account for the messy and unpredictable nature of writing or the idiosyncratic habits of writers.

Service learning creates the conditions for students to practice writing processes in a way that addresses these concerns. Because writing projects are defined and planned in collaboration with community organizations, in response to those organizations’ needs, students can never entertain the fiction that they are writing alone or in isolation. Also, because the writing process in a community partnership is not orchestrated by the teacher but instead evolves in response to a unique rhetorical situation, at no point does it seem to represent *the* writing process. Indeed, community partnerships are unpredictable, and although this unpredictability can be frustrating at times, it also teaches students that writing requires flexibility and adaptability and that it rarely proceeds according to predictable steps.

Student Experiences: The Writing Process

As students composed their tweets for the Southlake DPS, they engaged in extended processes that were deeply influenced by social dynamics. For example, in contrast to students’ typical planning procedure, in which they brainstorm ideas by themselves, students first had to meet with the public information officer to determine what sort of writing project would meet the needs of the DPS. Even after the writing task had been defined, students could not simply retreat in isolation and compose as they normally would because they had to consider their groupmates’ ideas for how the tweets should be written, and agreement did not come easily. Each student composed, sought feedback, and revised, and then the group as a whole worked to combine the individual pieces into a coherent series of tweets. Once the group settled on a final draft, they sent it to the public information officer, only to learn that he was unsatisfied. The students’ tweets had adopted a serious tone, and the officer wanted the messages to be more humorous and lighthearted, which was more in line with the style of the DPS Twitter feed. Also, the students had attempted to cram in as much information as 280 characters would allow, and the officer advised them that their tweets would have more impact and get more views if they were shorter and extended across a long series. After another extended round of revisions, the students carefully edited their tweets, sent them to the officer for final approval, and within days saw their words published for an audience of more than 12,000 followers.

As this brief description makes clear, students engaged in practices that resemble the conventional stages of the writing process: planning, drafting, revising, and editing. What made this process different from their experiences with academic writing was that they were deeply engaged with others throughout the process, and the composing process itself was messy, recursive, and unpredictable.

Reflective Writing

The introduction to the revised TEKS for English I-IV states that the integrated strands that structure the standards focus on “reflective writing” (TEA, 2017, see Introduction part 1). This term appears nowhere else in the standards, so we can only assume that the TEKS mean to suggest that the writing standards themselves exemplify reflective writing practices, even if reflective writing itself is never explicitly required. Students may, in fact, become reflective writers as a result of having met the TEKS writing standards, but compositionists (e.g., Yancey, 1998) have argued that the most effective way to foster reflective writing is to require written reflections. In service-learning courses, reflective writing is often required, even in non-ELA courses that require service unrelated to writing, because it allows students to critically examine their work in the community (Anson, 1997; Cooper, 1998; Julier, Livingston, & Goldblatt, 2014). When the service-learning course is also an ELA course, and the service students are performing is writing itself, reflective writing assignments allow students to reflect both on their writing and their experiences with community organizations more generally. Below we discuss in more detail how written reflections help students grow as writers and as engaged members of the community.

“Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing,” a joint publication of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, NCTE, and the National Writing Project (2011), recommends reflective writing as a valuable component of any writing assignment. Written reflections engage students in metacognition—thinking about thinking—and self-assessment, activities that help students take control of what they have learned and identify needed areas of improvement. Such self-awareness facilitates growth and learning transfer, as students “use what they learn from reflections on one writing project to improve writing on subsequent projects” (p. 5). Reflective writing assumes even greater importance when students are writing for external audiences and engaged in authentic composing processes, such as in the service-learning project described here, because these experiences are so different from conventional writing assignments. When students reflect on how they worked to meet the audience expectations of their community partners, they follow the recommendation of the “Framework” to “connect choices they have made in texts to audiences and purposes for which texts are intended” (p. 5). And by reflecting on the unpredictable, often messy, process of planning, drafting, and revising written products for external audiences, students meet the call of the “Framework” to “examine processes they use to think and write in a variety of disciplines and contexts” (p. 5). Again, students benefit from regular reflection on their writing practices, even on the most familiar writing tasks. When the task is entirely new and students are trying out novel approaches, reflection helps them sort through what worked or did not work, what processes were productive or unproductive. This helps them cement what they learned and expand their writing repertoires.

To this point we have focused on the ways service learning helps students improve as writers, but service-learning courses are never just about academic achievement. When students cross classroom borders and apply their writing skills to help community organizations fulfill their missions, inevitably they confront the social issues that

create a need for these organizations in the first place. Service-learning commitments position students as active, contributing members of the community, and reflective writing helps students process their experiences in these roles. As Anson (1997) explains, reflective writing is central to service-learning pedagogy precisely because students are moving beyond familiar classroom contexts:

Unlike more static courses in which students may gather information on a controversial topic and write an argumentative paper, service courses place students in a physically different setting where they must negotiate complex roles and behaviors, define themselves relative to others who may have very different lives and backgrounds, and visit areas of their communities where they may have never set foot before. [Reflective writings] offer students in such courses a rhetorical space to express their feelings and write about their new experiences. (pp. 169-170)

This sort of social engagement may seem far removed from literacy instruction, but only if we separate academic literacy from civic literacy. After all, the TEKS promise that the standards are important “to ensure a literate Texas” (TEA, 2017, see Introduction part 1), and surely to become part of a literate Texas, students must engage with issues that affect Texans.

Student Experiences: Reflective Writing

After Carroll students had completed the final versions of their tweets and published them on the Southlake DPS Twitter feed, they were asked to compose written reflections on their experiences. One theme that emerged from these reflections was students’ struggles to write as part of a team, as opposed to their typical process of writing in isolation with only themselves and the teacher to satisfy. As Brandon² wrote:

At first, I thought this would be an easy assignment. How hard could writing a few tweets really be? Writing funny tweets with my friends sounded like a dream assignment. I never anticipated that we would have different ideas on what tone to use.

In a similar vein, John wrote: “Many times during the process I felt like we were being pulled in different directions. It was challenging to make everyone happy and not isolate or offend anyone.” Of course, these students were writing collaboratively, which highlighted the social nature of the writing process. Had they been writing individually, they would not have received the same exposure to the ways “the writing act, as a kind of communicative interaction, automatically includes other language users” (Kent, 1999, p. 1). Be that as it may, we would like to think that these students’ insights into the social nature of composing will transfer to situations in which they write alone.

A second, more pronounced theme in student reflections was the eye-opening experience of writing for audiences beyond the classroom. Just as Brandon was surprised to find that his friends had different ideas for the tone of the tweets, he was surprised to learn that his group’s initial draft failed to meet the expectations of the public information officer and DPS Twitter followers: “I never anticipated that our original idea wouldn’t be even close to what our many audiences would want and respond to.” Another student, Joseph, expressed surprise both at the complexity

²All student names are pseudonyms, and all student writing is reproduced here with written consent from the students and their guardians.

of the group's intended audience and the stakes involved in writing for that audience:

When our group first started the Service Learning Project, I had no idea that there would be so many audiences we would have to consider. Part of the grade would come from feedback from the organization's contact person—I understood the need to really write for a real audience.

Perhaps the most telling reflection on writing for a real audience was produced by John, who contrasted his experience specifically with prior experiences in school:

Writing for an audience other than [the teacher] was really different. I've written persuasive essays before and I'm on the debate team, so I have experience trying to get people's attention. However, I didn't have the experience of working with an actual organization. That definitely increased the stress level for me and our group.

As these comments make clear, writing for real, external audiences imposes constraints on students that are impossible to replicate in the traditional classroom. Obviously, most of the writing students do in school will be confined to the classroom. It would be impractical to suggest otherwise. What we hope these student reflections make clear, however, is the value of developing community partnerships that allow students *some* opportunities to write for the world beyond the classroom.

Finally, as students reflected on the work they did in the community, they expressed appreciation for the opportunity to make a difference on issues that are important to them. One prominent theme in the reflections was the importance of students getting to choose the organization with whom they would partner. For example, Alan wrote:

When [the teacher] first introduced the assignment to the class, I wasn't that excited, to be honest. Then I learned that we would get to select our own organizations. I really enjoyed creating something that I didn't have to recycle on the way out of the classroom.

Because students were working on issues that matter to them and on projects they would send out into the world, they applied academic skills with greater interest and enthusiasm. For example, Samira wrote:

I also really liked the research element to the Service Learning Project, where our group had to find out how many accidents were caused by texting and driving and sprinklers left on. To see the actual numbers really showed me the depth of the problems we focused on.

Students like Samira remind us that sometimes the best thing we can do for students is to step aside and allow them to speak to the world beyond the classroom. In that spirit, we allow her the final word:

I'm in debate, and social issues are very important to me. I think a lot of kids my age don't really understand the danger of not being informed when it comes to topics that affect people other than ourselves. We are often told that our voices don't matter. The Service Learning Project made me feel like we were contributing to the solution and not just part of the problem.

Service Learning Resources

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