Afterword: Community Writing Pedagogies in the Spirit of the New *Mestiza*

Thomas Deans

**Abstract**

This brief postscript considers several recurrent themes in the previous chapters (reflection, multiple literacies, assessment, diversity, internationalization) and poses several key challenges that face theorists and practitioners of community writing (the network and neighborhood approach, technology, the need to include community partner voices, and labor practices).

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in a Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode — nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns ambivalence into something else.


In this passage Gloria Anzaldúa is discussing the politics of identity, not the pedagogy of service-learning. Yet I think of her not only because several of the case studies in this collection are set in the U.S./Mexico borderlands but also because service-learning resonates with a *mestizo/a* (of mixed heritage) ethos in the literal sense that — as the hyphenated term suggests — it combines two spheres of activity and in the figurative sense that this mode of teaching is still marginal within the larger landscape of writing instruction and fraught with all kinds of challenges and complexities, even if at the same time crackling with possibility. There are two unspoken assumptions against which the courses described and research reported in the preceding chapters are set: that of the typical first-year composition course, which generally features instructional practices such as active learning, revision and peer review, and that may even take up questions of social justice, but that is ultimately governed by traditional academic literacies; and that of the typical technical communication course, which may include “real world” case studies but that still often evades the most vexing realities that writers face in civic and workplace
settings. Such courses can be quite valuable, of course, but advocates of service-learning tend to get restless with such traditional schooling scripts, so much so that they turn their ambivalences into “something else” and — to borrow more language from Anzaldúa — in doing do they discover that they must be open to dealing with contradictions and develop a tolerance for ambiguity.

We can recognize that mestiza amalgam of complexity and possibility, risk and reward, in the case studies discussed in this book, and indeed across the landscape of service-learning. Service-learning is not just experiential — an extension of the progressive and experiential education movement in the United States rooted in the philosophy of John Dewey — but also experimental. While a first wave of social science research on service-learning has affirmed its value (Eyler & Giles, 1999), and a first wave of composition research has articulated it place in writing studies (Deans, Roswell, & Wurr, 2010b), we are still figuring things out, still moving ahead in the spirit articulated by a professor of public health who, like me, was first trying out service-learning in the mid-1990s. She reported that employing service-learning was like “being on a galloping horse: I was going fast and it was exciting, but I was not always sure where I was headed” (Community, p. 5). With nearly 20 years behind us, we now may, as the essays in this book suggest, have a tighter grip on the reigns and a better sense of where we’re headed, but that spirit of galloping forward has stayed with us.

Beyond going off script and into “something else,” I see five more key themes in this book that mirror the broader movement of service-learning in composition: reflection, multiple literacies, assessment, diversity, and internationalization. Each can serve as a defining feature of the current state of service-learning and at the same time be a site of struggle, of ambivalences, and no single essay can deal with all of them at once, but this book productively loops back to this cluster of concerns and rightly affirms their importance.

After discussing these five themes I will point to four key challenges that are vital to the future of service-learning in composition but that are not especially visible in this collection: networks and neighborhoods as sites for community/university writing partnerships (rather than just single-semester courses); emerging technology as it relates to the pedagogy and practices of community-engaged writing; community partner voices in the assessment process; and labor practices, especially the consequences of having most U.S. college writing courses taught by part-time and contingent faculty.

Key themes

Reflection

Early service-learning advocates, eager to define their new pedagogy, often posited reflection as its defining feature. Reflection was framed as the bridge between the “service” and the “learning” and without it one could have community service and academic learning — each valuable in its own right — but they would not add up to service-learning without reflection. That issue is now settled: reflection is essential;