

# “The Dance of Change” in an English Department: A Service Learning Case Study

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**ABSTRACT---** *The benefits of service learning (SL) in college courses have been well-documented. Evangelopoulos, Sidorova, & Riolli (2003) have demonstrated, for example, that students in courses with an SL component report greater satisfaction with those courses than they do in traditional courses with similar content. The present article describes a multi-disciplinary SL project at a small public university in southwestern Oklahoma. The authors, a professor and a graduate student (who was a participant in the project as an undergraduate), describe how the service learning project and insights derived from Senge (1999) created student interest in an English department and garnered institutional support for similar endeavors. The article also describes the challenges faced in keeping SL projects relevant and useful for future students as well as the challenges involved in making such projects more “transformational” for students in the humanities disciplines. As the humanities places a value on critical inquiry, SL projects must be designed in such a way as to encourage social and institutional critique along with instruction in workplace skills.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTON

The benefits of service learning (SL) in college courses have been well-documented. Evangelopoulos, Sidorova, & Riolli (2003) have demonstrated, for example, that students in courses with an SL component report greater satisfaction with those courses than they do in traditional courses with similar content. Kuh (2001) reports on the findings from the National Survey on Student Engagement and suggests a consensus exists for SL providing a “deep engagement” in ways that other methods of teaching cannot. Further, there is widespread agreement among students and faculty that the community partnerships SL seeks to build are invaluable to their institutions. Avalos, Sax, & Astin (1999) found that involvement in SL led to greater cultural understanding and reduced racial stereotyping for students who participated in such courses and also that participation in SL led to increased charitable work and volunteerism on the part of participants for up to 9 years following graduation. And, finally, as Peters (2011) and others have demonstrated, SL can provide a high degree of work-related skill, both for the disciplines represented in SL sites and for work habits in general.

But, initiating and developing SL courses is not an easy task, particularly in disciplines where more traditional and hierarchical pedagogies hold sway. Butin (2010) suggests that, in some academic disciplines, SL creates an uncomfortable disruption to more traditional top-down models of pedagogy. It seeks to question assumptions about how knowledge is created and what constitutes useful knowledge and skills and, as such, can pose a threat to more institutionalized teaching practices. Gujarathi & McQuade (2002) suggest that the both real and perceived time demands on faculty members in the development of SL courses provide another source of resistance. Mercer and Brungardt (2007) note that the continued development of SL courses, once they have been offered initially, also poses quite a challenge in that SL sites often change from year to year. In our case here at this small public university in Oklahoma, we report on the challenges of developing service learning opportunities in an English department with few offerings in the way of “professional” writing (a subject we will return to later in this article) and very limited history in providing internship or service learning opportunities for undergraduate English majors. We use the insights provided by Senge, et al (1999) as a guide in how to encourage change in an organization. One of the authors of this article is an Associate Professor of English at the university. The other is presently a graduate student in technical communication and also a graduate of Cameron University. She was a student participant in three service learning projects while an undergraduate. The article provides a case study of how faculty and students helped to develop an ongoing SL program and create a greater awareness of and demand for coursework in workplace and professional writing.

## 2. THE UNIVERSITY

Cameron University is a small public university in southwestern Oklahoma. Its main campus is in Lawton, Oklahoma, the 5th largest city in the state, with a population of around 97,000, and it is the county seat of Comanche

County. The city is home to the Fort Sill Military Reservation and, of course, the presence of the U.S. Army creates a high degree of economic stability for the city. Employment, however, other than the Department of Defense, tends to be concentrated in low-wage industries. Goodyear maintains a tire plant here and Raytheon and Northrup Gruman have offices here but many of the new employment opportunities come in the retail sector. As a result, the median income is lower than the state average, which itself is 86% of the national average. Rather infamously, the city ranks seventh among urban centers in the United States for incidents of violent crime against women (Ryan 2013). It is not surprising, then, that the university has followed the lead of other similarly-sized colleges and begun to offer service learning opportunities and other potential generators of employment for its students. For example, the university houses a Center for Emerging Technology and Entrepreneurial Studies (a “business incubator” for students and local businesses) and provides a wide variety of internship opportunities for students in technical, scientific, and business majors. In 2012, the university’s Office of Academic Affairs and its Office of Career Services began an initiative to encourage faculty members to develop SL and internship opportunities. While the schools of Business and Science and Technology were already in the process of developing such programs, the university’s Liberal Arts departments were slow to offer such opportunities until very recently (Cameron University 2014). Although departments of English in most universities are less often seen as sites for SL, with cases such as Deans (2000) providing an exception, there existed a number of rather interesting factors at Cameron University that created obstacles for new SL opportunities in its English Department. We feel it is instructive at this point to examine some of the English courses offered at Cameron University.

In the Department of English and Foreign Languages, where courses are listed as having ENG (English) or PRWR (Professional Writing) prefixes, there are only two courses that offer any sort of “practical” experiences. One, English 4983, the Writing Internship, is described in the university’s undergraduate catalog as “field experience in writing under close supervision of a field-based supervisor and professor” but, this course had been offered very infrequently over the past decade. The other, PRWR 4003, Online Magazine, provides the chance for students to “learn to solicit, evaluate, and select literary fiction, nonfiction, and poetry for production of The Oklahoma Review,” the university’s online literary journal. It is worth noting here that, unlike many other universities, “professional writing” at Cameron University is synonymous with “creative writing” (fiction and poetry) and that there is only one course offered in technical writing, a 2000-level Introduction to Technical Writing (Cameron University, 2014). The graduate school experience of one of the present authors in this article was one more-or-less typical of that offered in larger institutions where “professional writing” is a term used to describe all manner of workplace writing. Cameron University’s English faculty includes two published fiction writers, a published poet, and a published writer of creative nonfiction and, while all are exceptional writers and teachers, the English program has a somewhat narrow focus and was not well-situated to answer the university’s call for more SL course offerings. However, as one of us (the student author of this article) was performing background research for an article for the university’s student newspaper, an interest in gaining “real-world” experience started to germinate.

### **3. A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY CAPSTONE COURSE**

While working on an article regarding chess and one of our Computer Sciences faculty members, the student author of the present article learned of a multi-disciplinary Capstone course that involved majors in Multimedia Design, Information Technology, and Computer Science working on a software development project for the City of Lawton. Capstone courses at the university are senior-level courses that challenge students to use the knowledge and skills they learned in their particular majors. Her conversation led to the faculty member she interviewed expressing a need for someone with good writing skills to write manuals and other documents for the Capstone students and the client departments in the City. Her interest was piqued and inquiries were made to the Chair of the Department of English and Foreign Languages to allow a technical writer to join the project. The Chair assented and presented the project to the other author of this article, who opened a designated course section of ENG 4983 (Writing Internship) and contacted the faculty in the other departments offering the Capstone course to devise a list of tasks and expectations for the English student.

During the Spring 2013, the student author of this article worked as the technical writer and editor for the Capstone project. The client was the Lawton Police Department and the project was the creation of a Gang Member database. Two teams of students developed software that sought to provide Lawton police officers with a resource they could access remotely that would look up a suspect’s prior convictions, gang affiliation, addresses, motor vehicles, and other information. Both projects were well-received by the police officers and the Information Technology Department of the City of Lawton and plans were made to combine aspects of the two projects into one database. Although there were no other formal opportunities for her to continue study in technical writing (as she had completed the English 2333 course), she and the other author of this article devised an independent study project, in which she would work as a consultant for the group projects in an upcoming English 2333 course. The rationale for this independent study was two-fold. First, of course, she could continue study in technical writing. Second, her work with the group members might create interest in upcoming Capstone projects and might encourage other students to exert pressure on the department for more opportunities in technical and professional writing.

This approach, which involved the student author of this article acting as a sort of “change agent” in support of new opportunities for technical writing and internship opportunities in the English Department, has its roots in the

strategies described by Senge, et al (1999). Senge's suggestions for profound change in an organization, as detailed in his *The Dance of Change*, first involve the construction of informal networks of people who, at first, become convinced that change will benefit them. In this case, the student author was able to speak with other undergraduate students about her experiences working on project teams, the recognition she received from the City of Lawton, and the "marketable skills" she learned. Further, by having her consult with and provide feedback to the English 2333 students, she was able to demonstrate how her experience had provided new skills and knowledge.

The Senge approach continued with the faculty author requesting that his multimedia, information technology, and computer technology faculty colleagues consider using other English majors for the Capstone course in the upcoming academic year. This more formal aspect of Senge's approach was aimed at creating mechanisms through which the (hopefully) growing student interest could be channeled. This proved an easy "sell" as all the interested professors saw the value in having a technical writer and editor work with the project teams. Indeed, they were so suitably impressed with the student author that a plan was devised to bring her back as a sort of senior editor working with two new junior English majors on the new project (the development of a new online Work Order System for the city's Public Works departments).

The faculty author of the present paper and his colleagues on the Capstone project were, in turn, able to share the experiences with the university's Office of Career Services and gain membership on a new Internship Task Force with representatives from university administration, nonprofit agencies in the city, and local business leaders. The faculty author is presently arranging three writing internships with local nonprofit organizations. One of the "junior" technical editors in the Work Order project will return in Spring 2015 to work as Senior Editor on the new Capstone project.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Difficult economic times create an impetus for universities to offer students practical instruction that includes workplace skills. In the case described in this article, English majors were able to obtain guided practice in workplace writing and editing in a project that would actually yield some "real-world" outcomes. The growing student interest we have seen in this and other new internship and service learning projects can certainly be attributed to student anxiety over what they will do after graduation. And, while the teaching of workplace skills is something valuable, the English Department at Cameron University faces an additional challenge in incorporating the skills and experiences obtained in these "practical" courses into the disciplines we teach. These "real world settings" that form the sites and contexts for these courses and internships exist in some rather well-defined economic, social, and political systems. Thus, it becomes incumbent for our faculty to introduce a critical component to these courses in the same way that English courses in general feature critical readings of texts. Mitchell (2008) suggests that traditional approaches to service learning either assume that such projects are already inherently related to social justice or critical analysis or are simply concerned with other issues such as the teaching of some rather acontextual "workplace skills." There exists, however, a growing recognition that service learning must enable to students to recognize and more deeply understand the social and economic structures in which they are asked to work. A big challenge for us involves seeking participation and input from all our colleagues to ensure that service learning and internship offerings meet department objectives and, more important, that they represent what our department considers necessary for students to take away from a course. Our work continues, then, in incorporating these courses into what we do as a department and as a university and in making these courses transformational rather than simply conduits for the transmission of information and skill.

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