Expectation, Reality, and Rectification: The Merits of Failed Service Learning

Suzanne Kesler Rumsey
Purdue University Fort Wayne, rumseys@pfw.edu

Tanja Nihiser
Purdue University Fort Wayne

Expectation, Reality, and Rectification:
The Merits of Failed Service Learning

Suzanne Kesler Rumsey and Tanja Nihiser

Prompted by Cushman's and Grabill's call to "ask and answer the difficult questions" about service learning (*Reflections* 2009), this article addresses the difficult question of "what happens when service learning goes wrong." Authors engaged in family history writing and service learning with a local historical group. When the project was unable to be sustained, authors theorized a three-part methodological continuum of *expectation, reality,* and *rectification* to articulate the merits of failed attempts at service learning.

In the Spring 2009 issue of *Reflections*, Ellen Cushman and Jeff Grabill articulate a growing need in the field of public rhetoric, and in all community-based academic work, to ask and answer the difficult questions. They write, "We want to call attention to the fact that we have many colleagues wrestling with similar attempts to understand the meaning and value of community-based work. These attempts require theory. Experimentation, exploration, and narratives rooted in personal or programmatic experiences often the [*sic*] mark early years of the development of a field" (3). Further, Cushman and Grabill note that if we ask the difficult questions and answer them, we are "developing rich methodologies for [our] lines of research in communities an organizations [and] provid[ing] possible link pins between community literacy and cultural rhetoric" (9).

The following article is an attempt to theorize, experiment, and explore the methodology exhibited in a recent service learning course called "Literacy and Family History," which was a cross-listed, senior undergraduate and graduate topics course. In the spring of 2009, we first wrote portions of our own family histories; then in the second half of the term we engaged with a community organization called the Cottage Lake History Project[1] to research and write portions of the lake's history, and stories of its families, from the 19th century through the 1960s. Members of CLHP wanted the historical text to help preserve the lake's history, which is being threatened by "McMansion" homes, destruction of historical landmarks, and a breakdown of what they call "family and lake life." As an introduction to historical writing, students worked in the first half of the

term to construct their own family history projects. They then applied the same methodological framework to the collaborative effort with CLHP by researching topics assigned to them, organizing and constructing binders of data, and by compiling the data into usable narratives for the final text.

Our goals in this article are threefold. First, we seek to validate the type of research we engaged in by emphasizing its merits, particularly its focus on a frequently overlooked population in public rhetoric: the family as community. Family history writing, when divorced from the often pejorative descriptor "genealogy," is a form of writing that responds to the ongoing need we have to reconcile present with past, to honor our elders, and to care for that which has been passed to us from our predecessors. Family history writing is a form of writing that is personal, yet inherently public, as individual writers gather data from multiple sources within their family community and from elders.

Second, we seek to explore the methodological choices we made while constructing family history documents in the class. We see the shifting understanding of the work we did with CLHP as a continuum of what we're calling *expectation, reality,* and *rectification*. Students and community participants came to the project with a set of ideals; they were faced instead with the realities of collaboration, intersubjectivity when researching "the personal" and one's own family, and archival research when "facts" conflict. They then worked to find equilibrium and to resolve often disparate "facts" and to see the value of story and lore.

Third, to truly ask and answer "the hard questions," we seek to discuss what happens when service learning projects go wrong. For although we would say our experiences in the course were successful personally and academically, we cannot say that the collaborative efforts we engaged in really resulted in productive work in the community. Our methodological continuum applies to this situation as well. We had expectations of what working with CLHP would be like. Those expectations were far from the reality of the project. Now we seek to articulate this disparity in a manner that is respectful to our community participants, but honest in the failures of the project so as to rectify the experience for future work.

Value of Family History Writing as Public Writing

Few would argue against the inherent value of community literacy or service learning in an archival setting, and even fewer would argue the value of working with preservation and historical societies, as well as oral histories. The value of doing historical, archival and library based service learning has been addressed by recent research: Norcia (2007); Levine *et al.* (2005); Canada (2001); Endacott (2005); Heiselt & Wolverton (2009); and Riddle (2003). Similarly, research has shown that various types of service learning

work with the elderly, oral history, and within communities is valuable (e.g. Ames and Diepstra (2006); Blank, Johnson, & Shah (2003); and Dorfman and Underwood (2006)).

Yet, the written genres associated with "genealogy" carry with them a pejorative "hobbyist" connotation; hence its value as a genre of public writing is suspect. Many view it in terms of "nostalgia" which is "from *nostos* – return home, and algia – longing" (Boym xiii). It "is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (Boym xiii). Further, the goal of traditional genealogy is usually breadth of information. A researcher amasses as many names and dates over the largest span of time possible. Genealogy, in this way, is finite – there are only so many names and dates that one can find. And, a finite amassing of names and dates has little value to a wider audience than the person researching or those whose names appear in the collection itself.

> "I guess what surprises and frustrates me most of all in this family history research-business is how strongly people want to cover up and/or deny their pasts."

By contrast, we argue the goal of family history writing is depth of information. A researcher is focused on developing a person's or a family's story, on knowing all she can about that person or family. Family history writing in this way is "infinite" – like a giant spider web or woven tapestry in which a researcher can gather the threads of a person's or family's life and weave their stories. Certainly there may be a sense of nostalgia, as it "inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals" (Boym xiv), but its weaving of research threads mitigates its sentimentality.

Further, family history writing has an audience that is outside the privatized or individual work of traditional genealogy. Certainly family members (e. g Community members) are interested in the family history writing produced in a given project. But in terms of family history writing being "public rhetoric," we would point to the growing number of public, professional, and academically rigorou organizations that concern themselves with genealogical research of all kinds (e.g. National Genealogy Society, The American Genealogist, American Ancestors, and the New England Historical and Genealogical Register). Also, academic research in family history has "gone public" in the 2006 and 2008 PBS television

Cushman and Grabill address this neglect as "two tensions." They write that the first tension "is that much of the work in our field that we are calling public rhetoric deals with the public intellectual, but the study of people doing rhetoric in the world is perhaps more important and less visible. A second tension holds notions of the publics as, at best, distinct from and, at worst, exclusive of cultures an organizations" (6). Similarly, Kevin Ball writes, "Far too often, critical pedagogies focus on larger cultural critique while neglecting individual and local issues, thereby silencing those students meant to be empowered" (130). Family history writing is "rhetoric in the world." By examining it and valuing it, we suggest connection between public and private, between publics and cultures, and between public writing and cultural rhetoric. Doing so enables us to avoid the "cultural propensity to ridicule anything considered local or nonacademic [which] thus carries over into the classroom, leaving students with no way of thinking about their communities other than in negative or devalued terms" (Ball 133).

Expectation, Reality, and Rectification

Family history writing as a form of public writing responds to the need expressed by Cushman and Grabill. They write, "We should be able to make transparent our research and teaching goals; to describe how we systematically parse, code, and analyze data; and to write in a variety of genres that distribute these forms of evidence for various audiences and purposes" (10). Family history writing, as a woven tapestry with depth, purpose, and audience, is one such variety. The following section explores the methodological choices made in our class as they exist on a continuum of *expectation, reality,* and *rectification*.

To form this continuum, Suzanne, the instructor for the course, read student data compiled over the course of the class and looked for thematic ways of representing the methodologies students employed. Students were invited to participate in the research by an outside colleague while Suzanne was outside the classroom. The consent forms were held until after grades were submitted at the end of the term, at which time we began reading and coding their submitted artifacts, which consisted of research journals, family history projects, interviews at the beginning and end of the term, and projects for Cottage Lake History Project. The course is discussed in more detail in *Community Works Journal* (Rumsey 2010).

The best way to show this continuum is to trace the patterns through several examples. The examples we've selected from our data show the continuum in the development of our family history writing methodology, the collaboration with CLHP, and the projects and overall service experience with CLHP.

Family History Samples

Expectations of how to do family history research and writing were many. In her entrance essay, Tanja, a graduate student in the class, expressed excitement that she'd finally "be able to do something with" her collection of primary documents from WWI and II. She noted, "The last time I tried to figure out something to do with them, I was told to donate them to the historical society." Such a suggestion by a librarian points to the fact that most people don't really know what to "do" with genealogical collections of any kind. Again, if genealogy is the focus, the breadth of collection is the point. Here, Tanja hoped and expected to "do something more" than simply sit on the collection.

Tanja's reality came in a more-altered research form than any she'd faced before. As a student in more traditional sociological research, she had been trained to ask a question, and then let the data "talk back" to respond. Instead what she found in working on her family history project was a sort of fishing without knowing what the net would catch. Family history writing as we performed it in this class was a type of exploratory research where there isn't really a hypothesis or a thesis statement or an essential claim, per se. Instead, students had to let the data tell them what their claim was. Usually a student would begin with a question or a family member they wanted to know more about. Then, they began to "dig" for what Beth called "buried treasures."

Tanja met with discomfort in finding the correct voice for such work. She felt "caught between methodologies." In one reflection, she noted, "What I despised about psychology was the latent need to "fix" individuals. Maybe it is my perception is skewed, but that's how it felt. Find the outlier and "fix" them. Not for me. Sociology wasn't any better. Couch people into a theoretical framework, forming a hypothesis. Ugh. Still, no! Not for me."

Tanja rectified this "new" methodology in ways that were profound to her on personal and professional levels. She noted, "I think that when we get so bogged down in protocols, we lose the ability to just approach these people as people." Later, as we constructed this article, Tanja realized that a larger implication of this methodology was that it changed the way she does research. As a social scientist, she mused, "maybe it was to challenge the way I conduct research. Maybe it was to make me a thorn in the side of researchers that dismiss qualitative research as 'soft. ' …. Maybe there is such a push to make everything generalizable in the social sciences that we dehumanize it and miss the point. Sometimes we strip the human from human subject research."

What Tanja's experiences, challenging, compelling, and enlightening, indicate is that family history writing enables even experienced researchers to expand their methodologies. And they speak to the overall learning that service to one's home community offers. Tanja was able to connect the

private world of her family with the public world of research. She felt that "it allowed me to feel like I was a part of the community in a way that I hadn't before." Essentially, by taking her "distanced, social-scientist, researcher persona" to her home community, Tanja contextualized the community within a larger social dialogue. She noted after doing the project, "at a time when lots of people my age are leaving the county, I feel more compelled than ever to remain." She was able, then, to see her family and county as community, not just "home" which we so often take for granted.

Hidi approached the class with the hope to "discover where I come from before it is too late." Hidi's reality was that as she dug out facts and dates, the "facts" complicated the stories that her family had always told her. She was met with conflicting data, in other words. She questioned:

> Do I then write about the facts? Do I ignore the facts and write down the story? Do I write them both down side-by-side and let my readers (including family) decide what they want to? What are the consequences of all three methods of "delivering" my family history? …And what if this sort of thing happens as I begin my service learning project? The people with whom I'll be working won't be my family, they won't know me, so how do I handle these inconsistencies?

Hidi also wrote, "I guess what surprises and frustrates me most of all in this family history research-business is how strongly people want to cover up and/or deny their pasts."

In rectifying the disparity between her desire for answers and her family's desire for privacy, Hidi's choices for the project essentially boiled down to where she had the most information. When asked about how she decided what form her final family history would take, Hidi simply said that she didn't have enough "story" for her project to be much more than a "traditional" family tree. Also, she noted that there was not enough time available for the project to get past the myriad of dead ends.

Hidi's story speaks to the intersubjectivity of family history research. There is a potential conflict between the student and a family she may not want to research. Further, there is conflict when the family would rather their stories remain untold. At the close of the term while drafting this article, I inquired of my participants whether they felt "forced" into researching their own family. Their responses were unanimously "No." Most expressly stated that they took the course specifically to do such research, and if they had felt uncomfortable or without a family, there was room to explore simply the concept of family rather than one's personal stories.

Still, the multiple subjectivities the students had to negotiate are significant as we theorize the methods they employed. Some students

mitigated these conflicts by privatizing the project and simply opting not to make it public. Others specifically made efforts to engage family members in the project collaboratively so that the documents produced reflected a collective understanding rather than one person "telling family secrets." Finally, all students actively reflected on their positions within their research journals and in conversation with the class. Collaboration and reflection are hallmarks of service learning as well as of this mitigation and bridging of subjectivities.

Finally, Erin's work in the course specifically addresses the continuum as it manifested in our methodological choices. Erin entered the course wanting "to research strictly facts" about her family. She "did not want to invent anything about [her] family or events in their lives." She quoted a Yiddish proverb that says "A half-truth is a whole lie" and sought to find "data" about one of her ancestors.

Erin's reality was a hope that "these half-truths prove to be as helpful as they have been disappointing. In the early stages of my research, I was upset that the information that I found was not consistent, but then I realized that this was one of the unavoidable obstacles in the realm of genealogy research." Because of the inconsistencies in the factual data she could find, Erin's family history project was in part a means to reconcile these discrepancies; her project itself was an act of rectification.

Erin concluded her project by saying: "Conducting genealogical research and writing a family history unquestionably has some inherent obstacles, such as finding the facts of a family's experience in a muddle of memories and stories or locating valuable resource during the research process." She went on to say:

> Resources are available if researchers look in the right direction. Libraries grant access to genealogy databases, such as the prominent Ancestry.com. Courthouses and local governments keep records from as early as that community's inception. But most importantly, other members of a researcher's family can share their not-so-common-knowledge, help search for historical documents, or put the researchers into contact with other individuals who might possess more knowledge or information. Based on the biased nature of the family experience, family histories may never be whole truths, but regardless of that reality, it goes without saying that the family history research experience is most fruitful and fulfilling when it becomes a family affair.

Essentially what Erin discovered was that the value of family history writing isn't so much in the archiving of facts and data but in its nature

Suzanne Kesler Rumsey and Tanja Nihiser   141

as a community activity that involves family members, in its "dappled" documentation (Lauer). Erin rectified the discrepancies between "facts" and "stories" by realizing that the woven tapestry of various sources is stronger than exclusively facts.

Service Learning Project Samples

The continuum of *expectation, reality*, and *rectification* was evident in the collaborative efforts with CLHP as well. Suzanne met with members of CLHP in August of 2008 when they sought assistance in publishing their extensive collection of photographs, stories, and history of Cottage Lake. She suggested the collaborative venture and the members agreed to participate in a service learning project with the class. We then began to discuss how students could be involved in their work, the value of what we were trying to do, and how the course might help all involved. In these conversations, we spent a lot of time discussing how the students could help them to expand their research of the lake into areas that had less data, and how other students could take existing archives and compile them and write narratives for the final text.

CLHP members participated in the class many weeks when we met at the local public library's extensive genealogy center. They met and talked with students while we worked on the individual projects during the first half of the term. By midterm when we began working with them in earnest, we had topics for each student to pursue (e.g. Native American groups of the lake, railroads, camps, bands, and various family names associated with the lake's history). So, as they had with their individual histories, students set out to research and compile data.

Just as we had expectations going into the individual projects, we had expectations about the sort of data we'd find on our assigned topic for CLHP. The reality of the situation was also similar to the beginning of the term: students often remarked that they spent hours searching for a piece of data, and instead found information that they "didn't want or need." Some simply could not find *any* data pertaining to their assigned topic. Students were then faced with the fact that this project was not as personal or familiar or, possibly, interesting as their own family history projects had been. When they hit with the same difficulties in data mining, they had nowhere to turn to get more answers or new leads because they had no real connection to anyone at the lake. Their only connection to that place was CLHP members, and we soon found that we had some faulty expectations of the project and CLHP members themselves.

As a class, I think we expected to be met with more specific guidance by members of CLHP on their needs for the text and where to go when we hit dead ends. We expected that they knew what it was they wanted and that our job was to follow their lead. This, as we see now, is a flawed expectation,

due in part, we believe, to the plethora of overwhelmingly positive literature available about the merits of service learning.

Instead, we met with the same realities as our individual projects produced: conflicting facts, dead ends, discomfort in not knowing "how to do it right" or "what it should look like," and uncertainty of our place within the writing we did. Further, we met with realities of collaboration: it isn't perfect or easy, sometimes best efforts to work together don't produce the intended product, and the more stakeholders there are in a project, the more dynamic the collaboration must be to account for it. This reality is probably similar to what is experienced by all those new to service learning, but it was not a reality we were prepared for.

The rectification of this half of the course was not as smooth as it was for the individual projects. Whereas we each found ways of making sense of the inconsistencies and wove our own tapestries in the first half of the term, with this service learning venture, we did not have the personal "foothold" to stand on or the sense of freedom to let the data take us where it would. The organization was selected simply because two members approached Suzanne several months prior looking for help with their text. Out of their collaboration, the course was designed, though there were no formal ties between the organization and the university or class. Because Cottage Lake was not a place we had vested interest in, there were fewer points of purchase on which to base our work. Further, because we were researching and writing in service of another organization, we could not simply "fish." We felt as if we were trying to find specifics and do specific tasks, except that those "specific" tasks were poorly defined. Our only point of contact for the project was our community participants, and they were as uncertain about what they wanted from us as we were. Hence, the rectification for the service learning with CLHP leads us to our final section, "when service learning goes 'wrong.'"

When Service Learning Goes Wrong

In hindsight, it still isn't entirely clear to us where the breakdown in communication occurred. Certainly students were frustrated at their lack of direction and lack of purpose and the inconsistencies of data. Most of those feelings Suzanne merely chalked up to students' "growing pains" when school gets hard. Tanja was "one of the lucky ones" who had been given a plethora of data, so her difficulties with the service also were minimized. But students' complaints were legitimate. There was a distinct lack of direction to the project, and there were very limited means to get our questions answered.

Further, the course received a service learning grant that was to pay for various tools and facilities (thumb drives, copy costs, private lab

time at the genealogy library downtown, etc.) as well as an actual visit to the research site of Cottage Lake. Due to a "bureaucratic mix-up" with the grant's paperwork, we literally did not receive the funds until the week of final exams. This meant that students' only connection to Cottage Lake was the two members of CLHP. Students did their best to ask questions and supply the writing and research that CLHP members requested.

Overall, the course itself was a "success," particularly for student learning, based upon exit interview data. For example, Alex wrote of his hopes as an historian being replaced with new knowledge:

> Though I had not discovered brand new research, [the hope of an historian]… I learned more about possible limitations of research. I also learned that when a problem arises, there are multiple avenues to explore to find a solution. Though this is not the outcome I expected in a service learning project… This class has taught me that even mistakes and dead ends can ultimately lead to success and that new avenues of thought and execution are to be encouraged and accepted as a challenge.

Erin wrote, "This course went in a different direction than I had expected it to go, but I still feel as though the experience was worthwhile." Hidi wrote, "I have found personal and historical value in this type of research." And Tanja wrote, "This course has surpassed any expectation I could have even imagined. This is one of the most influential courses in my entire college career." Clearly, from the students' perspectives, the course meant something.

We believed that members of CLHP also had found it a success. In interviews with them they said "we don't expect that students will write 'the book' but that they will be writing pieces." Further, they expressed pleasure at the projects we submitted to them, but there was a great deal of work to be continued, so we ended up writing an addendum to the grant to pay two research assistants, Tanja and an undergraduate, to continue the work over the summer. Tanja and the other research assistant worked in collaboration with Suzanne, and under the direction of members of CLHP, to take other students' compiled binders of data, narratives, and notes and write portions of the CLHP book. They wrote concise, carefully documented "factual" histories, because as outsiders to the lake, they did not have access to or knowledge of the family lore, historical artifacts, or local associations that CLHP members had. As researchers, we all assumed that the members of CLHP would then weave in the threads of family lore and narrative along with the historical images to craft a more personal, "dappled," text we described earlier in this article.

Instead, CLHP members chose to rewrite everything that the research assistants had put together, removing all documentation of sources, and created what they thought was a more "reader friendly coffee table book." In spite of the fact that we were following their instruction, they were somewhat critical of students' heavily cited and historical writing, saying things like, "Of course it was written this way. They are students and don't know any better." Though students had written more nuanced texts for their own family projects, they wrote "research papers" in this context because that is what they thought CLHP needed them to do. Further, CLHP closed off communications with Suzanne, but told her that they'd need an editor when the book was completed. So, after 18 months of collaboration, communication folded between CLHP members and us.

As we wrote this article, then, we were looking for ways to rectify this negative experience. We wanted to understand where we went wrong, whether the perceived failure and miscommunication was "our fault." To a certain extent we played the blame-game, but truthfully, we just wanted to understand *how* this could have happened so that our next service learning efforts would not make the same mistakes. So began our search for professional literature on the subject of "failed service learning attempts." We were amazed at what we found; or rather, we were amazed at what we *did not* find.

We searched in every database our university's library could provide and met with a reference librarian to ensure we hadn't forgotten anything. Our search terms went through every permutation we could devise of the words: "service learning," "experiential education," "community engagement," "service," "experiential learning," "failure," "error," "wrong," "negative experiences," "mistakes," "blunders," and "blame." Our list of search terms cast a wide net, beyond the bounds of English studies, and yet the results of these searches produced scant articles or books that addressed our specific questions about service learning. While several sources address mitigating students' and partners' differing expectations of service learning (Bacon (2002); Sandy & Holland (2006)), as well as institutional perspectives and critiques (Bacon (1997); Butin 2010), few sources that we could find discussed the specific questions we were looking to answer.

By far the most helpful source we found was *Blundering for a Change: Errors & Expectations in Critical Pedagogy*, edited by Tassoni and Thelin. In particular, Elizabeth Ervin's chapter "Learning to Write with a Civic Tongue" illustrates our own dilemma when trying to imbed our experiences within existing work. She writes that the accounts of service learning are "almost uniformly optimistic and inspiring." And just as Cushman and Grabill call us to ask and answer difficult questions, Ervin states, "being a good citizen in our profession, like being a good citizen in our larger society, demands more honest narratives, full of inconvenient and even troubling detail about

the challenges new pedagogies pose and the incongruities that exist between our practice and our ideologies" (144-5).

Our course was similar to Ervin's in many respects. She wrote of her class, "this group did a lot of running around but found little useful information. They felt frustrated and aimless, and I felt derelict in my duties to lead them in some clear direction" (Ervin 147-8). Further, like Ervin, we wondered whether our project was "an 'inauthentic' exercise in civic participation simply because it didn't fulfill the purpose we had originally envisioned" (154). Though we would say that the course itself was not the failure we are talking about here, over the course of our semester, Hidi in particular questioned the validity of the work we were doing. She truly asked tough questions like "How are we being 'cared for' by CLHP?" and "[If] public service entails joining others in a common project of social change…. How are we helping a larger public than just CLHP? And why haven't we discussed issues beyond our immediate projects? (i.e. The problem of 'McMansions' on Cottage Lake.)"

> Like Ervin, we question, "Did it fail because it replicated (at least in part) a well-heeled local project that was already in the works, and because my students and I didn't interact in any meaningful way with our audience?"

While Hidi's questions were certainly valid, the "failure" in our course, we believe, occurred after the close of the term, when student researchers were attempting to actually compile the CLHP book. Like Ervin, we question, "Did it fail because it replicated (at least in part) a well-heeled local project that was already in the works, and because my students and I didn't interact in any meaningful way with our audience?" (154).

We now understand that we made assumptions about what sort of writing CLHP actually wanted. While these assumptions were based on our collaborations with members, they were still assumptions. In hindsight, we see that they didn't really want the kind of writing we are calling family history writing in this article. Nor did they want traditional history writing, which is the closest example of what we were able to produce for them as outsiders of the lake. Instead they wanted a text that memorializes the lake in a more sentimental fashion, or, as we discussed earlier in this article, more of a *nostos* or nostalgic artifact rather than an enactment of rhetoric. Our frustration with this is not so much the lack of "academic rigor" in their final

product. Rather it is that we felt misguided into producing something for them that wasn't actually what they wanted. Then, when we didn't write what they really wanted, the entire project fell apart.

Further, based on our conversations with them, we assumed that the completed text would be a form of public writing, made accessible to a wider audience interested both in researched "fact" about the lake and personal and historical narratives. We saw samples of this sort of document at the genealogical library. Now we understand, however, that members of CLHP instead wanted a text that was for a specific audience of lake inhabitants who do not require research data, except in the vaguest form. We don't discount the personal value a sentimental text has for those who are invested in the lake, but our assumption was that the woven fact and stories of the collaborative text would make the lake's history public and be of value to a wider audience, for a wider purpose. And this assumption, unfortunately, meant that the project could not be sustained.

Implications

Clearly, things "went wrong" in our project. Clearly, there were expectations, probably on both sides, that did not match with reality in this situation. But the rectification, the "coming to terms" of this difficult situation is perhaps the greatest gift members of CLHP could have given us. For in our attempts to make sense of a difficult situation and the closing of 18 months of collaboration, we've found a significant "truth" about service learning that makes our experience more valuable than any of the plethora of overly-positive published experiences suggest.

We have learned, like Alex who said "even mistakes and dead ends can ultimately lead to success," that the heart and soul of service learning is in the rectification of disparate goals, the fact that there are breakdowns in communication, and that all those who do this work struggle with inconsistencies. In other words, "things going wrong" is the *point* of service learning. As Ervin put it, "…as we know from studies of language acquisition and basic writing, getting it wrong is often how we get it right. That is, errors serve a useful heuristic function: As catalysts of critical reflection and action, they can bring us to the brink of new understandings" (155). The importance of our continuum is that it accounts for things going wrong. It expects things to go wrong. And it assumes that when things do go wrong, which will indeed happen, learning is still possible. Moreover, the learning that all participants gain – students, community participants, and faculty alike – is the sort of learning that service learning continually purports: experiential, hands on, "real life" learning.

Probably one of the toughest questions we've had to ask ourselves, based on Cushman and Grabill's prompting, is why should we even bother

to do this again? Why put ourselves out there when we know things will go wrong? What is the larger purpose to the effort to "be outside the ivory tower"? In answer to this, we offer some of the class' reflective comments about its value, even in the midst of "things going wrong."

Erin wrote of the family history project as "more of an organic thing. There's more to it than just the 'facts. ' …By working on this project… I also came to think of family history as something you do or create and not just something you find." Of the CLHP project, Erin wrote that it "made me think about WHY we think preserving history is so important…through artifacts and structures and physical things, not just names and dates, information and intangibles. More specifically, it made me consider how much history is contained even in the smallest community."

Tanja wrote that she learned that "I had to accept that the world is not black and white or cut and dry. Shades of grey exist." She further found that "there is room for 'I' in my research. In fact, 'I' can make my research better. It is more personable, human, and relative…. Personal can have meaning without being gushy… [and] Writing does not have to be dry and overtly technical to be valuable."

And, as we've noted before, Alex was working through his own methodological continuum of *expectation, reality*, and *rectification* all along in the course, as he was "a little disappointed with this project… [but] In the process of providing such a service, I learned more about possible limitations of research."

Suzanne's response to Alex at the time illustrate our continuum as it pertains to the sorts of archival research students did in the class, and as it pertains to service learning overall. She wrote:

> what you've done is *PRECISELY* what a good researcher does whenever he or she faces doing work of actual value to another person in an act of service. Road blocks, frustrations, and ambiguity are part and parcel to real research. In any truly valid and honestly-open-to-what-the-data-says research, we *have to* allow for these things.

The value of methodology is that we come to understand our position within the research we conduct. We acknowledge what assumptions we have and that those assumptions color our data. Your assumption was that you'd be doing a carefully designed study and that our participants would know precisely what it is they were looking for. But the reality of "real" research – the kind that isn't a set up by your professor to help "guide" you, the lowly undergraduate, to "knowledge" – is that you find out as much about yourself as you do your data, you find as much about the process as you do yourself, and you are left with mixed emotions about the whole mess because you

doubt, somehow, that what you've done is of any use. This is the hallmark of research, and it has been a hard and often painful lesson to learn throughout my own academic career…. [but] working for communities that may not be able to articulate their own needs is one of the greatest achievements we can have when doing service learning.

The irony of Suzanne's comments to Alex is that over the summer, when things with CLHP members folded, we experienced the same set of feelings he had about the project "being a failure" in some way. And then we began our own process from *expectation, reality,* to *rectification,* learning and understanding.

Ervin's article offers a final insight into our process and its "failure." She writes, "was it enough that we *did* it – that we opened our energies to such a complex project in the first place, that it led to frank discussions of difficult issues and prejudices, that we produced a document of potential use to someone other than ourselves…. In short, was our muddled *attempt* at civic writing… enough to make the project successful?" (Ervin 155). Ultimately, service learning is about people: our students, the communities we serve, and ourselves as learners. Dealing with people is often "messy," but without it, service learning would not be the activist pedagogy it claims to be. Our methodological continuum accounts for "things going wrong," and because of that, our findings are a richer and more powerful statement about the validity of service learning.

Endnotes

1. Cottage Lake is a pseudonym for the organization.

Works Cited

African American Lives. Dir. Leslie Asako Gladsjo, Graham Judd, Jesse Sweet, and Jack Youngelson. Performed by Henry Louis Gates. Thirteen/WNET Public Broadcast Station, 2006-2008.

Ames, Natalie and Stephene A. Diepstra. "Using Intergenerational Oral History Service-Learning Projects to Teach Human Behavior Concepts: A Qualitative Analysis." *Educational Gerontology* 32. 9 (2006): 721-735.

Bacon, Nora. "Differences in Faculty and Community Partners' Theories of Learning." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (2002): 34-44.

_____."Community Service Writing: Problems, Challenges, Questions." *Writing for the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition.* Eds. Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters. Washington, D. C. : American Association for Higher Education, 1997.

Ball, Kevin. "What *Are* We Talking About? Re-Imagining Community in Service Learning" in *Blundering for a Change: Errors & Expectations in Critical Pedagogy.* John Paul Tassoni & William H. Thelin, Eds. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers (2000): 128 – 144.

Blank, Martin J., Sheri Johnson, and Bela P. Shah. "Community as text: Using the Community as a Resource for Learning in Community Schools." *New Directions for Youth Development.* 97 (2003): 107-120.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia.* New York, NY: Basic Books, 2001.

Butin, Dan. *Service-learning in Theory and Practice: the Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Canada, Mark. "The Internet in Service Learning." *New Directions For Higher Education* 114 (2001): 45-50.

Cushman, Ellen and Jeff Grabill. "Writing Theories/Changing Communities: Introduction." *Reflections* 8. 2 (2009): 1-20.

Deans, Thomas. *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000.

Dorfman, Lorraine T. and Heather L. Underwood. "A View from the Other Side: Elders' Reactions to Intergenerational Service-Learning." *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships.* 4. 2 (2006): 43-60.

Endacott, Jason. "It's Not All Ancient History Now: Connecting the Past by Weaving a Threaded Historical Concept." *Social Studies.* 96. 5 (2005): 227-231.

Ervin, Elizabeth. "Learning to Write with a Civic Tongue" in *Blundering for a Change: Errors & Expectations in Critical Pedagogy.* John Paul Tassoni & William H. Thelin, Eds. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers (2000): 144-157.

Gates, Henry Louis. *In Search of our Roots: How 19 Extraordinary African Americans Reclaim Their Past.* New York, NY: Crown, 2009.

Heiselt, April K. and Robert E. Wolverton. "Libraries: Partners in Linking College Students and their Communities through Service Learning." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 49. 1 (2009): 83-90.

Lauer, Janice M. "Composition Studies: Dappled Discipline." *Rhetoric Review* 3 (1984): 20-29.

Levine, Mary Ann, Kelly Britt, and James Delle Heritage. "Tourism and Community Outreach: Public Archaeology at the Thaddeus Stevens and Lydia Hamilton Smith Site in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, USA." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 11. 5 (2005): 399-414.

Norcia, Megan A. "Out of the Ivory Tower Endlessly Rocking: Collaborating across Disciplines and Professions to Promote Student Learning in the Digital Archive" *Pedagogy* 8. 1 (2008): 91-114.

Peck, Wayne Campbell, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins. "Community literacy." *College Composition and Communication* 46. 2 (1995): 199-222.

Riddle, John. S. "Where's the Library in Service Learning? Models for Engaged Library Instruction" *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 29. 2 (2003): 71-81.

Rumsey, Suzanne Kesler. "Family History Writing: A Prototype for Local Service Learning." *Community Works Journal* (2010) <http://www. Communityworksinstitute.org/cwjonline/articles/ aarticles-text/srumsey-famhistories.html>.

Sandy, Marie and Barbara A. Holland. "Different Worlds and Common Ground: Community Partner Perspectives on Campus-Community Partnerships" *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 13. 1 (Fall 2006): 30-43.

Suzanne Rumsey is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Linguistics at Indiana U. —Purdue U. Fort Wayne (IPFW). She teaches courses in technical writing, multimedia, service learning, and family history. Her research has been published in *CCC, Journal of Literacy and Technology,* and *Community Works Journal.*

Tanja Nihiser graduated with her M. A. in Liberal Studies from Indiana U. —Purdue U. Fort Wayne (IPFW) in May of 2010. Her academic interests include family history, social science research, service learning, and research methodologies. She is now the Associate Director of the Center for Social Research at IPFW where she'll continue to work as a researcher in a variety of social and community settings.