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NewsActivist.com:

Reconsidering Community Engagement with Web 2.0

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Abstract. This paper describes the history and development of the open global network of student writers, www.newsactivist.com. This paper outlines the reasons the site was developed, by Champlain College Humanities Department Coordinator, Gabriel Flacks, and the goals it was intended to achieve for his pedagogical mission. Further, it considers how use of the site can achieve some of the goals of "service-learning" pedagogy with minimal barriers, goals pursued by co-author and site-user Lynn Reid.

Since the site's launch in Fall of 2012, it has become clear that its utility reaches beyond Flacks' vision for providing students a unique academic writing environment with access to multiple perspectives on contemporary issues and Reid's hopes for providing students access to an accessible curriculum geared towards civic engagement. Today, many teachers are using the site to meet other goals and foster cross-campus collaborations, in courses including, but not limited to, sociology, geography, business development, psychology and French and English as a second-language.

1. Introduction

"Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance" [Nussbaum 2].

The above excerpt from Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* points to what some in academia consider an alarming trend to emphasize vocational training in higher education. Many have argued that this development has the potential to distance students from learning the kinds of critical reading and writing skills that will enable them to both recognize and effectively respond to issues of social justice. Yet, despite Nussbaum's assertion that higher education is becoming more focused on profit than on democratic ideals, the prevalence of scholarship on service-learning and community engagement might suggest that civic engagement is, in fact, alive and well at many colleges and universities in North America. Service-learning is often defined as "(t)he use of voluntary community service as an integral part of an academic course: In a cycle of experience and reflection, students apply their skills and knowledge to help people, and in

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the classroom, they reflect on the people, social agencies, and communities they have encountered and on the nature of service. Service-learning is not primarily social assistance; it is a pedagogy, one that addresses not only the issue of how best to learn but also the best purposes of learning" [Haussman, 192]. Scholarship about service-learning is quick to identify the many potential benefits of incorporating such projects into courses across the disciplines: increased student engagement through experiential learning, the development of problem-solving and critical thinking skills, and a greater awareness of civic life. Or, put more simply, "service learning allows students to apply what they are learning to "real life" issues and to cultivate a commitment to community service and an understanding of social processes" [Parker-Gwin and Mabry 276].

While the goals of a service-learning curriculum are, as the above definition suggests, driven by pedagogies that value community engagement, reflection, and social justice, the term "service-learning" also often carries with it a complicated set of institutionally-driven expectations. Abes, Jackson, and Jones find that many faculty members shy away from service-learning projects for a number of key reasons, including high teaching loads, lack of funding for curriculum design, and the time and logistics involved in coordinating projects with community organizations [4]. In service-learning courses, faculty are often responsible to find volunteer opportunities for students, to cultivate relationships with community partners, and to supervise and follow-up with student work. As tenured faculty members are increasingly replaced with contingent and adjunct labor, these deterrents evolve into nearly insurmountable obstacles for the vast majority of those responsible for teaching undergraduates.

The challenges that faculty interested in service-learning might face are compounded further by the challenges that students face, particularly on commuter campuses. In these institutional contexts, where many instructors are graduate students or untenured contingent faculty, service-learning options may be limited, if offered at all. Further, as Sternglass' study of college writers indicates, students on commuter campuses also often have demanding work and home responsibilities that place very real constraints on time that can be afforded to academic work [5]. Adding the extra travel and volunteering time that a service-learning curriculum requires could be an extra burden to students who are already struggling to find time for attending college at all.

Rather than abandon service-learning (and with it, all of its positive educational outcomes), faculty and administrators need to rethink and re-envision the shape and scope that service-learning can realistically take in these communities and institutional contexts. In an attempt to foster civic engagement without fully committing to an institutionally-driven service-learning curriculum, Champlain College Humanities Department Coordinator and Professor Gabriel Flacks developed a curriculum he called *Newsactivist* and the website *www.newsactivist.com*. This Web 2.0 based writing curriculum and associated website promotes cross-campus collaborative writing about contemporary news, encouraging each student to learn about ways to become active in her community and allowing students to incorporate self-motivated volunteer work into a portfolio that feels much like a profile in an academic social network. Features of the curriculum intended to engage students in connecting academic and non-academic issues include: coordinated assignments across campuses where students describe contemporary issues that impact them; research of organizations and scholarly work that impacts contemporary issues; and sharing of stories and suggestions across an global academic social network built to support this kind of personal, yet collaborative, work. One of the benefits of the curriculum includes the opportunity for students to create a self-directed learning plan in which research and writing lead to real-world engagement with local or global issues that they feel are worthy of sustained interest.

Gabe Flacks and Lynn Reid first attempted to offer coordinated courses at their respective campuses integrating the *Newsactivist* curriculum in 2011. Although each individual course offering was successful on its campus, there was no website available to support cross-campus collaborative writing, a situation which hindered effective interactive writing and kept many students from

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collaborating naturally. This led Flacks to create a website to provide a solution to the problems facing teachers engaging in collaborative online cross-campus, writing exercises. Newsactivist.com provides a solution in the form of an academically-focused social network where students can share perspectives about current events, in doing so meeting instructors' pedagogical goals often associated with service-learning. Since the beta launch of this site in September of 2012, Reid's and Flacks' collaborative efforts have improved, students are able to interact more effectively, and dozens of other teachers across the globe and thousands of students have joined the site. Students and teachers using the site have found a way to extend teaching and learning beyond the walls of the classroom by introducing students into an academic network of constructive writers.

Below, we describe in more detail how the curriculum was piloted in courses at different campuses and explore the challenges that led to the development of newsactivist.com.

2. The *NewsActivist* Curriculum

Newsactivist was a term applied by Flacks to a curriculum he developed and piloted between 2007 and 2014 while teaching in the Humanities Department at Champlain College, a public college in close proximity to Montreal, Quebec. Champlain College is part of Quebec's CEGEP system, a system of two-three year institutions offering a variety of professional and "pre-university" programs. Most commonly, a Champlain student spends two years in a degree-program combining senior year of high school with freshman year of college, experiencing these formative years in a single institution, then completing a Bachelor's degree in three years. Courses offered by the Humanities Department often include students from disparate programs and career paths, and many students at Champlain are native speakers of French, studying in English for the first time.

After first appearing in Champlain as an extra-curricular offering, Flacks' saw the value of offering the *Newsactivist* program as credit-bearing elective course; this course has been offered annually at Champlain College since 2011. The goal of the curriculum is to provide a venue where a student can discover that the news can be affected by her own potential academic work and/or her hands-on volunteer-work. Over a semester of intense reading, writing, and collaborative exercises involving students from different parts of the world, it is hoped that students will move beyond passively reading the news and focus instead on how they can be active agents in fostering change.The curriculum unfolds in three-phases:

During phase 1, a student identifies a news story that deals with a social issue, explains it briefly, and considers how the situation could be improved. Each student posts to a personal blog twice each week, and these posts are tagged using the taxonomy provided by the *Newsactivist* website. These tags are associated directly with the designations of non-profits recognized by the United States. This ensures that for each story posted, a student will be able to locate an organization that is working to respond in some way to that issue or problem. In phase two, each student chooses one particular type of issue to focus on, based on the types of stories they found most compelling in phase 1, and considers a variety of literature related to the field, developing expertise in a self-chosen theme. In phase 3, each student researches and contacts organizations and/or academics working to enact change in their issue from phase 2 and completes the semester by volunteering with an organization or submitting a research paper on the relationship between academic disciplines and the news. The final assignment of the course is a summative blog post, supplemented with a multi-media element, which explains how academics and organizations can and do affect the world.

3. *NewsActivist* Course Offerings and Cross-Campus Collaborations

3. a. Fall 2009: Adapting the Curriculum in New York

In the spring of 2009, Flacks met Lynn Reid at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in San Francisco. He was seeking collaborators to enhance his own students' work

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in the soon-to-be offered *Newsactivist* course by providing students a wider and authentic audience. He introduced Reid to the curriculum in hopes of developing such a collaboration. Reid, then a graduate student and adjunct lecturer, introduced the *Newsactivist* model into a first-year writing seminar later that year. At this institution, an urban commuter campus in New York City, freshman writing seminar courses carried six credits—three for a "topic" course (which are offered across the disciplines), and three credits for a writing course that was connected to the topic. The topic and writing sections were each taught by a different instructor, and students received one final combined grade, which was averaged between the two sections. The primary goals of these courses was to develop a learning community, to teach students information literacy and research skills, and to have students write several academic papers, including one formal research paper scaffolded over the course of the semester. The *Newsactivist* curriculum enabled the ethos of service-learning to make its way into the course, while avoiding logistical challenges for both instructors (who were adjuncts) and students.

During all three phases of the course, the *Newsactivist* work was framed by a reading of James Paul Gee's *Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, which served as the primary text for the topic section of the course. In particular, we focused on Gee's key concepts: Discourse/discourse, Big C Conversation, socially situated identity, and significance. In order to connect Gee's terminology to blogging and activism, students read and analyzed selections from several blogs and non-profit websites, all of which contributed to students' understanding of how to analyze and join different discourse communities.

Phase 1: Because it was determined that students would benefit from focusing on a research topic early on, the class was divided into four focus groups: Education, Immigration, Urban Life, and Public Health. Students selected the group they wished to join with the understanding that most of their work during the semester would be on that general topic. Once students selected topic groups, they began posting blogs to their individual pages on a class site hosted by ning.com. Two posts on news articles related to the topic group were due each Saturday. Students were instructed to write a brief summary of the article, provide a link to the source, and then offer a reaction to the article. On Tuesdays, students responded to posts written by members of their group.

Phase 2: After blogging about news articles that were loosely related to their group's topic for several weeks, students were asked to focus on a specific issue related to their topic. These more focused topics included urban street fiction, teaching and learning with technology, refugees and immigration rights, the Dream Act, and many others. Students wrote informal research proposals that were shared with their peers at Stanford University via the Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Project Blog. After receiving feedback from their Stanford peers, students researched and blogged about one scholarly source and one news source for each of the next several weeks, and continued to respond to posts made by other members of their group.

Phase 3: During the last third of the course, students were asked to examine how the issue they had chosen to write about is dealt with in popular culture. Students were encouraged to find art, photographs, blogs, films, music, etc. that helped to frame their understanding of the issue. We also asked students to interview a leader or an expert on campus who could offer insight into their research topic. Students posted two blogs each week on a pop-culture artifact and continued to respond to posts made by other members of their group. At this point in the semester, students were also encouraged to work their understanding of Gee's terms into their blogging.

Final Project: The final project for this course was comprised of three parts: an original research paper, an original, free-standing blog about the topic, and a self-assessment paper that required students to analyze how their blog was engaging in the discourse surrounding their issue. The instructors for the course weren't aware of any institutional support for service-learning, and most students commuted long distances or worked extended hours outside of class, a combination of

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factors that influenced the instructors' decision to not include a requirement for hands-on volunteering.

At the end of the semester, students demonstrated a great deal of enthusiasm for their "activist" blogs. There were a number of logistical obstacles that prevented an "authentic" service-learning experience, but students reported that creating an activist blog felt more like "real" writing than many of the assignments they were completing for other classes. By the end of the semester, there were over 400 posts to our course blog, and students had written three short papers, a research paper, and a separate activist blog that included multimedia elements. Despite a fairly heavy workload, students remained enthusiastically engaged with the course until the end of the semester; in fact, this group of students requested an additional class meeting after our last scheduled class to reflect on their experiences with the course. A few students have also maintained and continued to add to their blogs over the past few years.

3. b. Spring 2011: The First Credit-Bearing *Newsactivist* Course at Champlain College and the Need for Newsactivist.com

In the spring semester of 2011, Flacks was able to offer the first credit-bearing *Newsactivist* course at Champlain College. During this course, Flacks incorporated the three-phase curriculum described above, so students were provided an opportunity to share personal perspectives on the news while becoming "experts" in self-chosen issues. To foster responsibility and encourage students to recognize the significance of their student-writing, Flacks asked each student to join his class page on the social network site ning.com. This allowed students to provide feedback to each other in an environment similar to popular social-network sites, but with a private and more academically-motivated style. This worked well, as each student took great care in writing, knowing they had an audience of their peers who were going to provide feedback on a semi-public site; however, it did not enable cross-campus collaboration, a feature of the curriculum that Flacks had intended to incorporate.

Flacks felt students would feel empowered as experts in their own neighborhoods by having an audience of peers located elsewhere on the globe with who they could communicate their ideas. By giving students commenting assignments which were expected to take advantage of this local expertise (only *I* know so much about my own street), Flacks hoped students would learn to draw from their own idiosyncratic and experiential knowledge-bases. Further, these assignments would enable students to consider how their academic work relates to non-academic life with a focus on issues that are self-chosen, not assigned.

One of the guiding principles of *Newsactivist*—building a connection between academic and non-academic communities—is a goal that has been argued for in terms of writing instruction and community engagement for decades, for example, in the pedagogical philosophies of Paolo Freire and John Dewey. More recently, Morgan and Streb argue, "when students have a voice in the project, service-learning provides a solution to some of the problems of civic disengagement" (155). The truth in this claim is evidenced by the students' final projects, chosen after several months of blogging about the news. For their summative project, they were offered the choice of volunteering and writing about their experiences in a formally structured final blog post, or submitting more familiar academic term papers: of the 27 students in Flacks' class, 17 chose to volunteer. They did so in hospitals, homeless shelters, and in creating their own original volunteer projects. These experiences were uniformly positive and many students continued to work with the organizations beyond the semester's end, including the development of a Champlain College campus food-bank that eventually garnered institutional support and continues to thrive today. The ten students who did not volunteer as part of their final portfolio project chose to write term papers related explaining how academic research from three distinct disciplines could impact their issue of focus. These students found relevant scholarly journal articles from three academic disciplines and connected this research to their blog posts about the news. In these cases, students were enabled to connect their

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academic work to contemporary news. Allowing students the choice of volunteer work or academic research gave students the chance to explore how to make change in the world in a comfortable and personal way and guaranteed that those who volunteered were personally motivated to do so.

During the same semester, Reid was teaching a research writing class at a community college in NJ. After meeting with the director of the campus' service-learning program, Reid was surprised to learn that students would be expected to complete close to twenty hours of community service in order to "qualify" for a certificate that confirmed their participation in service-learning. As with her previous experience, Reid opted to not place that additional (and arguably excessive) burden onto students who would already be challenged with demanding schedules, other competing responsibilities, and a new level of academic work. In place of a formal service-learning project, Reid assigned a research paper that required students to research a social issue through ethnographic and scholarly work.

Based on the success that both Flacks and Reid had observed in their previous classes, the two attempted to create collaborative exercises between their two classes of students. They hoped their students would teach to and learn from each other, describing interests, backgrounds and experiences, while discovering differences and commonalities. This would have provided students further sense of purpose and pride while expanding students' perspectives. However, the collaborative element of writing across campuses would fall victim to "technical difficulties". Although Reid and Flacks communicated throughout the semester and tried to use compatible web tools, such as ning.com and blogger.com, it quickly became clear that competing technologies would ensure that the exchange would not be easy. The Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Project Blog had limitations that kept it from serving the needs of Flacks and Reid as well. With some effort, Reid's class was able to comment on Flacks' students' posts during one class session, and Flacks' students were invited to join Reid's class's Ning site and provide comments. Although students did give and receive feedback in these different methods, the exchange was not ideal and Flacks decided to approach his campus director to find a solution that would enable smoother collaboration in the future.

4. *Newsactivist.com is Launched and the Community Grows: 2012-2013*

Flacks' campus director understood the problems Flacks was facing, and as a supporter of his course and the idea of cross-campus and cross-border collaboration, allocated a small amount of funding for the development of a website that would allow for better collaborative work. In 2012, Flacks had support in implementing his design for newsactivist.com, so as to address the genuine wants and needs of both teachers and students. On the new website, privacy settings allow instructors to create either a public or a private classroom space, depending on whether or not they want students to engage with students from another institution. Students can be invited to the site via an email, or can sign up independently and select their class from a list. Once a student has registered, she has complete control over the privacy of her writing; she can share her writing with only certain registered site-users, like their teacher, or only with only their classmates, or they can make their writing public and visible to all site and internet users. This gives students an immediate sense of the potential power of their writing, as each post can reach a global audience. To protect students from "internet trolls", the only people who can comment or add content to the site are those who have registered and been approved by a site administrator or teacher. Therefore, students will only receive feedback from site-users, an entirely academic community. A variety of further features are found at the site, each chosen in response to student and teacher needs.

The site went online in September 2012, supporting two teachers, Flacks and Eric Kaldor, a SUNY Brockport Sociology Professor whose students successfully collaborated with Flacks' students in the fall of 2012. To Flacks' surprise, the number of site users increased significantly over the next two semesters, winter 2013 and fall 2013, as an additional fifteen teachers and 1000 students joined the site. The *Newsactivist* website has supported cross-campus collaborations with teachers from a

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range of disciplines, including not only Kaldor's Sociology, Flacks' Humanities, and Reid's Composition courses, but professors of Geography, Psychology, Business, and Second-Language French and English courses, as well as a high-school level history course. An unforeseen benefit of the development of this network is that students can engage with students who work at the site, without being involved in teacher-determined collaborative exercises. The collaborations can then move from teacher-required, to student-motivated. In the spring of 2014, classes from Europe are expected join the site and teachers of journalism, science writing and other disciplines are expected to bring students into the *newsactivist.com* community. *Newsactivist.com* now serves as a fully bilingual (French and English) hub for coordinating cross-cultural and cross-institutional dialogues about issues of local and global significance, in an effort to better prepare our students to occupy the roles necessary for productive civic engagement.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the ways data supports our sense of the positive feedback the first adopters of the *Newsactivist* website and curriculum have experienced, we feel the growth of the site in its brief time online indicates its effectiveness. We invite any and all readers to browse the site and the student work shared therein in order to clarify both the site and curriculum's utility. It is our hope that our students will collaborate with yours in the future, in a web 2.0 model of service-learning.

To join the network of teachers please visit: www.newsactivist.com

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