In recent years, service learning has begun to find a home in English departments, often by way of the writing program (Gere and Sinor; Herzberg; Minter, Gere, and Keller-Cohen; Watters and Ford). Unencumbered by a disciplinary identity, service learning has, for a number of years, moved freely within the academy, sometimes attaching itself to sociology or psychology, sometimes to education or social work, and, in the past few years, to English. Service learning, which distinguishes itself from volunteerism by its emphasis on reflection as well as action, combines community work with classroom instruction. Like other areas—film studies, say—that have nudged their way into the big tent of English studies, service learning owes its origins to students as well as faculty. On many campuses, the earliest forms of service learning emerged from student-developed community service programs, while university faculty or staff involvement came later. Fueled by renewed calls for volunteerism within the larger culture as well as increased interest in experiential learning, service learning has flourished on some campuses. At Stanford University, for example, student participation in service learning increased from 40 percent to 70 percent between 1984 and 1995 (Watters and Ford).

The growth in service learning has coincided with reconfigurations within English departments. Many English departments have begun to emphasize the

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social processes of consuming and producing texts rather than focusing entirely on “the best that has been thought and said” (Minter, Gere, and Keller-Cohen). Put another way, cultural studies has moved into English studies and taken up residence next to literary theory. Cultural studies brings with it questions about public policy and the relationship of the academy to the citizens who support it (Nelson; Smithson and Ruff). Consequently, it raise the decibel level of assertions that being political in the classroom cannot substitute for the kind of civic participation represented by service learning (Cushman). Both theoretically and practically, service learning fits particularly well in English departments that foreground the ways people read and write, attend to cultural studies, and entertain questions about public policy. Service learning has found an especially comfortable home in composition programs. As Anne Ruggles Gere and Jennifer Sinor show, the processes of contending with expectations, undertaking actions, and reflecting thoughtfully fit comfortably for both the writers and service learners who seek to locate themselves in a text or context. For instructors who teach classes that grapple with social issues related to literacy, or who wish to provide a venue for students to connect with the situated complexities of issues and communities outside the classroom, service learning provides a ready and practical solution—although, as this essay will try to show, truly effective and ethical service learning is not easy to initiate.

Before embracing either the theoretical or the practical attractions of service learning, English studies will do well to consider the nature and potential impact of this newcomer to the field. Certainly service learning has already met with its share of critics, ranging from those who explore the potentially oppressive impact of even well-intended efforts on those who are “served” (Maybach) to those who note that many projects seem to promote relatively simplistic and distorted “individualistic” visions of social problems among those who “serve” (Seigel and Rockwood; Herzberg). The popular press has also begun to question the usefulness of America’s (and President Clinton’s) new fascination with volunteerism as a solution for social ills, as seen for instance in a 1997 article in the New York Times (Cuomo).

One of the most persuasive critiques of service learning in the English department appears in Bruce Herzberg’s “Community Service and Critical Teaching,” where Herzberg discusses a two-semester service project he created with a colleague. In the first semester, students take an introductory sociology class where they “examine the ways that literacy is gained or not gained in the United States” (310), drawing on a range of critical readings on the social forces that surround literacy. At the same time, students take a short class to prepare them to be literacy tutors. In both semesters, students enroll in Herzberg’s composition class, and in the second semester they serve as adult literacy tutors in a local homeless shelter.
While Herzberg notes that students generally “developed excellent tutoring relationships and all learned how to draw on their own resources both psychologically and pedagogically” (311), he is initially less than satisfied by the classes’ other accomplishments. His complaints seem to fall into three general areas. First, he notes almost in passing that students “did not seem attentive . . . to the analysis offered by the shelter’s assistant director, who explained that while the shelter provided critically needed services, it also undermined any sense of independence the residents might have.” Second, he worries that his students “tended to see their learners, quite naturally, as individuals with personal problems” (311), finding it “extremely difficult to transcend their own deeply-ingrained belief in individualism and meritocracy in their analysis of the reasons for the illiteracy they see” (312); “very few of the students,” he notes, “ever became indignant about what they saw.” Finally, he reports that “they would like to know if there is a ‘cure,’ but they don’t regard that as a realistic hope” (311); the students were not energized into social action by their experiences.

In the largest sense, Herzberg’s concerns about the service learning experiences of his students derive from the fact that both the initial conception of and the response to the tutoring experience remained essentially “private.” As Herzberg puts it, “If our students regard social problems as chiefly or only personal, then they will not search beyond the person for a systemic explanation” (309). They will fail to develop what Kurt Spellmeyer describes as “a social imagination, an awareness of the human ‘world’ as a common historical project, and not simply as a state of nature to which we must adjust ourselves” (cited in Herzberg, 317). Herzberg worries that service learning alone, without a critical classroom component, fails to enable students to become active participants in the public realm. However, he says that “time and work were on our side” in the different critically oriented academic classes that surrounded the tutoring experience, and that the students’ research projects “show a sense of life as a communal project, an understanding of the way that social institutions affect our lives, and a sense that our responsibility for social justice includes but also carries beyond personal acts of charity” (315, 317). Interestingly, however, Herzberg reports that the tutoring project itself did not generally appear in the students’ writings. He notes that this should not be surprising, since the academic portion of the class was not focused on the tutoring experience. Our own experience, however, leads us to consider another possible explanation for why the students did not write about or grapple fully with the social complexities inherent in their tutoring experience. Perhaps at least part of their reluctance arose from the limitations of tutoring itself as a tool for helping students “uncover” power relations and issues of social inequality in society. As we note below, while our example of a similar tutoring project, “Learning Communities,” led to outcomes similar to those of Herzberg’s effort, we nonetheless frame our results somewhat
differently, interrogating the theoretical grounding of the terms “public” and “private” as they are applied to service learning.

It is important to point out that we will be using the words “public” and “private” in a manner that may be unfamiliar to many readers. These terms have been used over the years in a myriad different ways for many different purposes. Part of our goal is to use the example of service learning to help us rethink the connections between and definitions of public and private as they are deployed in writing, literacy studies, and the field of English in general. Instead of treating, for example, the “private” as a location in which some people can be isolated, we examine both public and private as different ways of interacting with other people, modes of interaction that can occur in any space or location. In a simple sense, “private” (or, as we will explain, “caring”) practices involve unique relations between pairs of individuals where one “cares” for another, while “public” relations involve collective relations between multiple individuals who join together in a common project. These conceptions of public and private, we argue, provide extremely powerful perspectives from which we might explore and critique different activities of service learning and their relation to the field of English studies.

“Caring” Tutoring

One of the most common forms of service learning is tutoring, and it is, we argue, no accident that Herzberg’s critical comments about service learning involve a tutoring project. Tutoring is an activity that tends to enable certain kinds of discourse practices while discouraging others. At the same time, tutoring is inseparably intertwined with larger cultural understandings of what “tutoring” and “school” are supposed to entail. Students come to understand tutoring through their expectations of, participation in, and talk about the activity. Apprenticing students into a specific service learning context entails encouraging them to take on a specific kind of self and ideology, embodying relationships with those who are “served” and with communities beyond the context of the activity itself, that they can then discuss in class. This means that for community service learning to be successful in the manner Herzberg desires, the intellectual content of the academic class, the talking about, must map onto the doing, the activity of the service component. Otherwise, the academic material of the class will not clearly provide students with a useful structure within which to examine and evolve their assumptions about, for example, power and oppression in the service context.

In a manner very similar to that in the classes created by Herzberg and his colleagues, undergraduates in the “Learning Communities” project, developed by one of the authors, Gere, and her colleagues, participated both in after-school literacy tutoring programs (with elementary and middle school students who came to the program for a range of reasons) and in a weekly seminar that examined issues sur-
rounding literacy learning. The class was designed to involve undergraduates in conscious reflection on their roles as students, tutors, and citizens, drawing on a range of reading and writing activities that evolved over the course of the different semesters of the class (see Nye and Young). Unlike Herzberg’s project, a crucial and explicit goal of the “Learning Communities” academic seminar was to support the students in their tutoring contexts. It is important to note that the instructors of the different “Learning Communities” classes realized both that their students often entered seeing themselves as “liberal saviors,” as instructor Morris Young put it, and that the structure of tutoring had the potential to enhance the students’ vision of this “savior” role. Thus, the exercises, journals, and readings in the class were, in part, designed to grapple with these challenges. Because a number of the students met bi-weekly after their participation in the tutoring program, we could follow the development of their thinking through several semesters.

Like Herzberg’s effort, the “Learning Communities” tutoring project draws implicitly on a model of service we want to call, after Nel Noddings, “caring.” Noddings’s work, especially her Challenge to Care in Schools, is cited often in the literature on service learning as a central theoretical model (Kahne and Westheimer; Wuthnow).

However, a close analysis of Noddings’s theory of caring shows some important limitations. In Noddings’s caring, the one-caring receives the cared-for in an attitude of “engrossment”; the cared-for “fills the firmament.” At least initially, as ones-caring “we receive what-is-there as nearly as possible without evaluation or assessment” (Caring 34) from the cared-for. The first requirement of caring, then, is to “see” as completely as possible what the world “looks like” from someone else’s point of view. As Noddings says, “although I can never accomplish it, entirely, I try to apprehend the reality of the other” (14). The “caring” associated with the close personal work of tutoring requires students to focus intensely on the individual being tutored.

Caring involves what Noddings calls “motivational displacement on the part of the one-caring,” where “I receive what the other conveys, and I want to respond in the way that furthers the other’s purpose or project” (Challenge 16) and “there is invariably this displacement of interest from my own reality to the reality of the other” (Caring 14). “My rational powers are not diminished but they are enrolled in the service of my engrossment in the other” (36). Caring represents less an attempt to cooperate on what we will call below a “common project” than an effort on the part of the one-caring to support and develop the cared-for’s project.

The nature of tutoring and the caring for specific others inherent in it, its “motivational displacement,” has the effect of limiting students’ engagement with other, more “public” dimensions of their experiences. For example, Minter, Gere, and Keller-Cohen explore the many ways that tutors were led to negotiate multiple institutional and situational definitions and deployments of literacy. Yet, even
though the “undergraduates could represent their negotiations of literacy’s multiple meanings and discourses by juxtaposing scenes of reading and writing . . . undergraduates seemed unable (or unwilling) to move from these localized scenes to make larger, more explicit arguments about literacy.” In fact, one student who “spent a large part of the semester on and devoted his final project to issues of race, racism, and education,” wrote, nonetheless, that “tutoring did not have ‘anything to do or too much [to do] with literacy’” (683). As with Herzberg’s project, when it remained focused on “tutoring,” “Learning Communities” did not enable students to move beyond the personal or “private” dimensions of their work to consider its larger, more “public” aspects as effectively as we would have liked.

We do not argue that tutoring is not a valuable practice to include in students’ service learning experiences, but we do claim that its inherent emphasis upon caring and the “private” limits its capacity to support the goals of teaching students about more “public” issues such as social forms of oppression and normalization. First, no matter how caring a tutor might be, as Jaci Webb, Bruce L. Wilson, and H. Dickson Corbett have pointed out, without extensive knowledge of the context and communities in which a child lives, “caring” teachers tend to have a “limited view” of students’ aspirations. (Merely “walking in the terrain of another’s perceptions,” as they recommend, however, may not be enough. Visiting an “alien” community without some common project to explore with those one meets there always risks becoming a form of voyeurism.) Therefore, the tutor generally remains the possessor of an expert knowledge of literacy that cannot be entirely transformed and contextualized through the tutor-tutee relationship.

Of course these limits are not absolute. In another paper about the “Learning Communities” project, for example, Caroline Clark explains how her student, Seth, shifted from an originally “giving” to a more “relational” or caring approach to tutoring. Clark notes that Seth began the project seeing himself as the giver of expert literacy knowledge to his tutee, David, “positioning” David as “needy or a victim, someone who needs help because Seth is there to ‘help’” (14). David resists this positioning as helpless, and struggles to redefine what tutoring “is” with Seth. Slowly Seth seems to respond to David’s resistance, and as their relationship develops, Clark notes that authority is increasingly negotiated between the two, and “clearly there is a marked change in the focus of service as ‘help’ to service as ‘building relationships’” (20). Clark argues that the “opportunity to experience firsthand these pedagogical negotiations of authority enabled the college students, then, to begin to critique the preconstructing discourse of schooling and the power issues involved in teaching and learning” (21). Yet, while the relationship between Seth and David has become more caring, and while “Seth can now rely on David to share in that direction,” as the tutor, Seth remains a representative of and a mode of access to an expert university discourse community. Although there are moments of promise, tutees like David never become equal participants in the relationship,
as the child never possesses a store of knowledge or discursive skills that can be placed on the same level as that of any tutor—in a sense, this inequality is central to the very definition of “tutor.” In response to similar issues, Carol Maybach worries that “if the representation of these groups in society primarily emphasizes their needs, the strengths of these same individuals become minimized” (228). Maybach ends her article by indicating that an evolved and adapted form of the practice of caring would suffice to move us beyond this marginalization, a conviction we do not share.

Further, in the absence of a connection to a tutee’s larger community and of participation in a collective effort to transform social forces, the practice of caring encourages tutors to operate within a role that is as responsive as possible to the unique barriers that face the specific individual(s) they are working with. While an individual’s barriers certainly include and are largely determined by larger social structures, these structures are invariably filtered through the perspective of an individual tutee. As tutors seek to meet the unique needs of their partners, these social forces can easily be constructed as individual problems and may even be located in some imagined “autonomous” self of the tutee (as deficiencies, as “bad” decisions) instead of in more complex relation to the society at large. An individual’s problems can become “personal,” “private” problems.

There were cases, as noted by instructors Emily Nye and Morris Young, for example, where students began to move beyond the limitations noted by Herzberg. One student, Arnelle, interviewed her tutee “in order to learn about his family, and to determine Lawrence’s attitude about learning. Her project broadened as she and Lawrence distributed a survey to fourteen eighth graders ‘to see what they thought teachers could do in order to improve students’ learning abilities’” (13). Through this project, Nye and Young argue, Arnelle “learned more about herself as a learner.” Beyond this learning, however, we wonder if Arnelle’s project may represent the beginnings of a shift beyond the “caring” nature of tutoring toward something that looks more like a “public” project where both Arnelle and Lawrence might collaborate with increased equality on a common project. Hannah Arendt argued that even a group as small as two could form a “public” space if they engaged together in a common project (“Philosophy”). Supported by the instructors, some students moved creatively beyond what we argue is the initially “caring” structure of tutoring.

The strength of tutoring as a mode of service is its ability to promote close individual relations between tutors and tutees. Yet, without a deep connection to a tutee’s communities, the effort to create such a relation may be seriously constrained. Thus, it is not surprising that tutoring often fails to change college students’ visions of their tutees as lacking a free-floating “expert” knowledge that they can provide. At the same time, as a practice largely focused on the development of caring relationships with specific “others,” tutoring has limited capacity to dislodge what Herzberg sees as upper- and middle-class college students’ individualistic and meritocratic visions
of success and failure in our society. This limitation can be traced, we argue, to the essentially “private” nature of the tutoring relationship, where arenas of “public” discourse have little place, even when tutors are encouraged to reflect on more “public” issues in the class that accompanies the tutoring activity. What we have noted is a tendency of the tutoring context, not an absolute limitation—different students, of course, respond differently, as the other papers published on the “Learning Communities” project attest. Below, we examine a different approach to service learning that may begin to overcome some of the limitations both we and Herzberg have seen in the practice of tutoring.

“Public” Action in a Writing Course

In an advanced argumentative writing class taught by author Aaron Schutz, college students were asked to choose a problem that bothered them in the world and that had an actual audience they could speak to. Schutz provided some initial ideas, focusing on university-related issues that also had implications for the community outside the university, and students brainstormed about topics, finally arranging themselves in groups around five selections: gender equity in athletics at the university, the relatively new night entry policy at the student union, the problem of limited parking at the university, whether university athletes should be paid, and the lack of student participation in student government. The students’ task was to write a paper together about the topic arguing for a specific change and addressing the audience they had chosen; they were encouraged to actually present these papers to their audience. In essence, the students were asked to define their problem and present a well-argued proposal for change. Students moved toward the final paper via periodic reports on what they had accomplished. They collected a range of data for their projects, the bulk of which consisted of interviews, but also including university and student documents as well as other more traditional published material. Although this writing project looks very different from the more traditional tutoring effort described above, we will argue that it does, in fact, constitute a foundation for “service learning” projects where students can respond to what they see as a community need, with implications for other, more extensive efforts. The classroom itself constituted what we are calling a “public space” in which students could begin to articulate and address these community issues.

The gender equity group was made up of two women and two men. Two of the participants, both women, were students in the university’s Kinesiology program, and thus sports were a focus of their academic careers. Later, Schutz discovered in conversation that their topic arose because one of the men had a friend on the men’s gymnastics team that was, at that time, threatened with extinction in the name of gender equity. An early note from one of the women indicates that she, too, was concerned about and questioning this decision. After doing some inter-
views and research on this topic, however, the group shifted its focus to the question of women's basketball, a sport with little visibility (and little success) at our institution. As they shifted to the women's basketball topic, the entire group showed an increasingly personal commitment to the issue. In their final presentation to the class, both of the women referred to their experience as athletes and noted that this experience informed the evolution of their paper. The men were clearly significant contributors to the paper as well, however, doing a significant amount of the research and writing. From a topic that struggled with the "fairness" of gender equity, their paper evolved into an effort that explored complex issues about their own community and its complicity in attitudes toward women's athletics. The project became an effort to intervene in the social construction of women's identities, an effort at "cultural work" in Gere's terms. This paper was eventually published as a multi-page spread in the student newspaper, an emergence into a social space beyond the classroom.

After extensive discussion, the group decided that a central problem with making women's athletics equal to men's had to do with fan interest and participation. After interviewing representatives from the successful University of Iowa women's basketball program, the students decided that the "target" audience for their paper was the promotional department of the athletics department, and that the most efficient avenue for change would be a fundamentally different approach to marketing our school's women's basketball team. The traditional approach of focusing on students and alumni as fans, they argued, was not the most effective. "Students tend to be apathetic and closed-minded to women's athletics," they wrote; "often at times they have trouble overlooking the way women's sports were in the past." Instead, drawing on the Iowa experience, the students wrote that the school should seek out a fundamentally different audience, older women and youth in the community.

First, after speaking with a number of older women in the community, and with the Iowa marketing department, they argued that older women would be more appreciative of women's achievements instead of focusing on the differences between men's and women's athletics as "deficits." Second, the group recommended that the school reach out in a systematic way to a much younger audience as both a long- and a short-term strategy. The students noted that

by appealing to the youth, Iowa can hope to espouse tolerant attitudes towards women's athletics before persisting stereotypes influence these kids negatively. The objective of appealing to the youth is to make women's sports more socially acceptable in years to come. If schools can successfully market [to] grade school boys and girls, they may be able to generate an interest in women's basketball that persists into adulthood. Instead of being ashamed of their athletic ability, young girls will begin to feel good about their participation in sports.

In the end, the students admitted that "our promotions are only temporary." They noted that society tends to feel that something is wrong with women who
“compete,” placing them in the untenable position of not being women, but not quite being men either, and remembered women they knew who had resisted wearing their own varsity jackets, fearing they would not be seen as “feminine” enough. “Permanent success” they concluded, “is primarily dependent on society's change in attitudes toward women and athletics. . . . Women's basketball games need to be appreciated as women's basketball games rather than the game that men have been playing for years. As attitude changes in women's sports occur slowly, the next generation needs to be encouraged, supported and looked at in a positive way.” This group's excursions into new areas of the social world helped them begin to understand and address communal needs.

The group that examined the night entry policy at the student union was made up of two women who identified themselves as African American, and two men who identified as Jewish: Elizabeth, Mary, Alex, and Sam. The new night entry policy required those who wished to attend weekend parties at the union to have student IDs or be guests of students. In their initial prospectus, the students wrote that they had questions both about exactly why the entry policy was initiated and about which groups were affected by the policy. Initial conversations with the students indicated that they generally agreed that the policy disproportionately affected African American student groups, although all agreed they did not know enough about the policy.

As with the gender equity paper, the students' research consisted mainly of interviews. The students reported that they explicitly took advantage of their different social positioning in the university community to do research. In the section of the paper written primarily by Alex, he noted that

group work is often difficult because members may have different backgrounds and opinions on controversial issues. However, this was the strength of our search to answer the question of why the Union policy must be revised. Elizabeth and Mary are both African American students who use the Union as their social environment. . . . On the other hand, Sam and I (Alex) are both white students who use the Greek system as our social environment. These racial and social differences helped us greatly because we were able to look at all perspectives and keep open minds. Had we all been from the same homogenous background, it is quite possible that we would have missed the other side of the issue.

In their presentation, the group indicated their agreement with this statement. Sam wrote later about a discussion the group had comparing the experience of Jewish and African American students, noting that “Mary, Alex, Elizabeth and I learned a great deal about ourselves through this project. . . . I feel extremely lucky to have taken part in this project with them.” In written evaluations Schutz did not see until after grades were passed in, Elizabeth wrote that the group project “was a good experience and gave students the opportunity to exchange ideas and work together.” Mary wrote that she thought it would “be time consuming, but it turned out pretty well. It’s a cool idea.” While it is doubtful that the group operated in as bias-free a
manner as Alex and Sam seemed to think, it was clear from their writings and their presentations that all four felt that their perspectives were valued and made important contributions to the paper as a whole. Thus Alex goes on to write in his section of the paper that

our heterogeneity also helped us in terms of our research. Because of the different social crowds that we associate ourselves with, Sam and I were able to obtain interviews from white fraternity and sorority members, while Elizabeth and Mary gathered their research from members of the Black community. This is not to say that we are all racist and refuse to befriend members of different racial backgrounds. Rather, we realized that our social differences were our strengths and that by using these distinctions we could acquire a vast amount of information.

The group’s paper represented a complex understanding of the differences of opinion and social positioning of those involved in the night entry policy dispute. In the end they did not propose a specific solution, but explored the points of view on both sides, focusing on the issues of the “black community and how the new union night-entry policy has harmed it.” The paper explores both the opinions of the union’s administrators (who refused to discuss whether the policy had racial implications) and how the policy was received by and affected the African American community, which generally did not have its own venues for parties and thus was most affected by it. It traces the history of the implementation of the policy, which occurred without any public comment either from African American groups using the union or from a range of other groups, including the owners of restaurants located inside the union, the union’s security personnel, and even the union’s manager.

The paper did not end up accusing the university administration of overt racism, although it indicated clearly that fear of African American violence in particular was a direct cause of the policy. In their final report the students noted that they did not focus on the issue of racism because of its complexity and “difficult ambiguity.” They found that within the Black Greek Association there were “mixed emotions as to whether the new policy is directed towards African American students,” and that “every member felt that a new policy was needed, but not this particular one.” At the same time, however, Mary noted that the policy “may be racist even if it was not planned to be,” and Alex pointed out that while Elizabeth and Mary had both been carded at the union numerous times, he and Sam had never been asked for their IDs. In their presentation to the class they noted that the African American groups had many questions about the consistency with which the policy was applied to different groups. The group focused on the fact that, because of the historical situation of the African American community, “the major problem is that it is affecting African American students and other students of color because they are the main groups to use Union facilities.” The context created by the group’s presentations to the class and the dialogues that ensued around them constituted a local
public space, if a small one, in which the different perspectives and backgrounds students brought with them were brought to bear on a common issue.

The paper appeals not for a specific solution but for a more open dialogue among all the users of the union that might lead to a more equitable solution, noting that despite the statements of the administration, other unions they had contacted around the country with similar problems had arrived at different and yet workable solutions. Elizabeth and Mary noted in the section they wrote together that their group
debated whether or not we wanted to create an alternative Union night entrance policy in our conclusion. Then we realized that this would defeat the entire purpose of this project. We are here to say that a policy can not be constructed with only the input of a select group. . . . We believe that the policy should be altered, but the process of creating a final policy should be changed too.

The group then recommended further research involving all users of the union, restaurant owners in the union, and other affected parties, among other outreach efforts.

Despite the fact that this argumentative writing class, unlike the tutoring projects described above, did not include extensive readings on normalization or social oppression, the practice entailed in these students’ projects clearly uncovered for them many of the complexities of the operations of power in their own community and in the larger society. The analysis entailed in the paper writing and the need to conceptualize a specific audience led both groups to complex and multi-faceted conclusions. This was not automatic, however, and the class clearly could have been much improved by more talk about the activities involved in writing the paper. The other three groups, which we have not discussed in detail, were far less successful. Even in the case of parking, however, their project provided the potential experiential “stuff” that might have made such analyses possible in ways the practice of tutoring clearly did not. Still, the limitations of projects focused mainly on students’ self-interests, like parking, as well as the often homogeneous nature of university classes, indicate the need to move beyond the preliminary approach presented here toward efforts that help students construct “public” projects in conjunction with other communities—generally beyond the university—with different needs and visions of the world.

We would argue, however, that both of these projects are examples of “service learning.” Although they did not involve caring for specific others outside the university community, they encouraged students to enter their own community, take responsibility for an issue that had relevance in and beyond their own community, and reflect on it. Each of the two cases we have examined represents an attempt by students from different backgrounds to collectively articulate and promote specific changes in aspects of their own multiple communities. In one case, the students’ project resulted in an actual intervention in the larger community through its pub-
lication in the school newspaper. Their “service” represented an effort to alter the position of women athletes in the university and in society at large. While the night entry group did not take this last step, their formation of a “public space” in class nonetheless represents a form of action.

“Public” Service

The practice aimed for in these groups represents more what Arendt and Maxine Greene call “public” action than it does Noddings’s caring, even when it is conducted in the small space of the classroom. According to Arendt and Greene, public spaces are created when multiple individuals come together around a common project. In fact, given that Hannah Arendt and others have argued that these kinds of vibrant “publics” must be local (Arendt discusses the danger that large numbers can present for the creation of public spaces [*Human Condition* 43]), classrooms themselves might productively be reconceptualized as potential “publics” in their own right. In this kind of local public space, “being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position” (Arendt 53) on this common project. In a public space, therefore, people can take distinctive yet communicable stances on common issues. They can act with others by bringing their unique potentials to bear upon a common project. And unlike Jürgen Habermas’s view of the public, the relation in Arendt’s public is not one aimed at consensus, at some imagined “collective consciousness”; the goal is not to erase the distance between us, “but to be able to speak, listen, and act together across it” (Bickford 171).

Thus, while caring encourages individuals to give their motivation and interests over to the projects of specific others, the “public” in Arendt’s terms requires that individuals retain their points of view as they work together on common projects. Unlike Noddings’s vision of caring, while people must listen carefully to others’ points of view and must be prepared to change in response to what they hear, participants in public actions do not perform “motivational displacement”; they do not give up their own projects in the service of others. Instead, they attempt to fit their own projects with those of others.

Individuals participating in “public” practices are focused not on the unique perspectives of specific “others,” but on the common effort located between multiple individuals. In caring, one cares for the “other,” whereas the public is more focused on what Arendt sometimes calls “the love of the world”; it is focused on the elaboration of the common project and the maintenance of a space in which individuals might “appear” in some relative equality, taking coherent positions around such a project. Clearly, service learning informed by “public” practices offers an alternative to the “private” personal growth perspective; it moves away from what Harry Boyte sees as a disavowal of policy questions, of “seeing service as an alternative to politics” (766).
At this point, we might be expected to claim that as service learning finds a
place in English studies we need to connect it with more explicitly “public” pro-
jects if our goals for it include guiding students toward better citizenship. Certainly
we do believe that more self-consciousness about the relationship between the “ide-
ology” of a given service experience and the academic learning of the classroom will
enhance service learning in English departments. We also believe that the essentially
“private” nature of tutoring poses problems for a pedagogy that seeks more
“public” ends. But we resist an easy conclusion based on a dichotomy between “pri-
ivate” and “public.” Rather, we seek to complicate the ways we think about both
terms, presuming that service learning’s role in English studies will be more pro-
ductive if we proceed with a fuller understanding of its complexities. Arendt was
quite clear that “action” always took place in situated contexts, and that no theo-
retical framework could ever tell us beforehand what would be appropriate for a
specific situation. Arendt’s and Greene’s description of the public, like Noddings’s
vision of caring, is only a general theoretical guideline for conceptualizing the cre-
ation of public spaces. Each public space, to be successful, as is clearly shown in the
above examples, must draw on and be responsive to the local histories, social real-
ities, and individual personalities involved in any particular issue. Public spaces are
concretized not by the achievement of some abstract ideal, but by the appropriation
of the idea of collective action into a local, messy, and complex context.

Much of the dichotomous thinking about “public” and “private” derives from
academic feminism’s attention to separate spheres, the divisions between the (mas-
culinized) public and (feminized) private spaces occupied by women and men in the
nineteenth century. Despite the fact that individual scholars portrayed their work as
speculative and historically contingent, the separate spheres concept has become, as
Nancy Hewitt laments, “the most widely used framework for interpreting women’s
past in the United States” (301). The vocabulary of separate spheres was also ap-
propriated by political historians, most notably Habermas and Geoff Eley, to argue for
the emergence of a public sphere of politics that contrasted with the previously closed
and private world of Westminster and the royal court. These two uses of private—
one to designate the domestic world occupied by women and another to designate
a male-dominated center of power—illustrate the difficulty and danger of treating
“private” as a monolithic concept. Similarly, the term “public” carries multiple and
often conflicted meanings. As Nancy Fraser explains, it can refer to three analytically
distinct things: the state, the economy of paid employment, and arenas of public dis-
course. Furthermore, she argues, this concept depends upon masculinist gender con-
structs and brackets social inequities. And the boundaries between public and private
are always arbitrary and determined by power relations.

Here, we are exploring conceptions of the public and the private as different,
local, discursive practices, as varying approaches to relations among individuals.
And, as Fraser points out, we cannot escape the ways in which these different prac-
Practices reflect the workings of power in society. Joan C. Tronto and Julia T. Wood, among others, point out, for example, that caring tends to be a practice engaged in more consistently by those who are in more subordinate positions in society: women, people of color, people of a lower social class, among others. Thus, even though our public/private distinction does not include a "location" in which some people (women, for example) can be isolated from the public, neither is it a neutral concept that somehow escapes inscription into larger cultural forces of inequality.

Fraser's demonstration of the problems inherent in framing "public" and "private" in dichotomous terms has implications for our thinking about service learning. Seeing these two concepts as entirely separate would make it impossible to see, and value, the ways in which Schutz's students' "private" personal interests intersected with the "public" ones they addressed in their papers. Similarly, a dichotomous perspective makes it difficult for us to recognize and affirm the extent to which students in the tutoring program did, in fact, begin to see many of the complexities of the operations of power in their own community and in the larger society, as Minter, Gere, and Keller-Cohen, Nye and Young, and Clark, among others, have pointed out.

It would thus be inaccurate for us to say that tutoring and the project in the argumentative writing class represented, somehow, "pure" forms of the private and the public. As we noted above, tutoring itself is not a defined "practice" so much as it is an activity, inseparably interrelated to cultural visions of what it ought to entail. Efforts like Herzberg's and that of "Learning Communities" have attempted to enhance the more emancipatory and socially responsive aspects of tutoring, and they have had some success. Much the same could be said about the argumentative writing class. Clearly in the groups in the writing class caring remained an important aspect of the relationships among the students.

It is important to note, therefore, that both Noddings and Arendt recognize the interconnectedness and mutually supportive aspects of public and private practices. As Noddings says, "when people have loving regard for one another, they can engage in constructive conflict—although it is by no means easy, even then" ("Conversation" 115). Private—in our terms, caring—relations provide the foundations for more critical public spaces; they provide environments within which unique individuals are encouraged to advance their own specific projects, and where they are nurtured as they explore their own situated visions of the world. Arendt also clearly understands this interdependence of the public and private (see Skoller 111; Benhabib 211). A focus on the creation of a local "public" does not mean that caring relations are somehow excluded, nor does a focus on caring relations exclude interactions with larger social issues.

The public, in the sense that we mean it here, is constituted by local, largely face-to-face, activity. Thus, each of the papers presented by the groups in the classroom represents a strategic emergence into the larger "social" realm, as Arendt called
it, in which some of the multivoiced quality of the group seems to be collapsed in favor of a more unified statement. The groups operated rather like the women’s writing clubs studied by Gere, which enabled their members to regulate “the information about them and their activities that circulated to nonmembers. Clubs, in other words, provided spaces where women could exert some control over the terms of their representations” (44). The “intimate practices” of these clubs included both “public” and “private” (caring) practices (see 46–47). As with the groups in the argumentative writing class, the practices of reading and writing positioned clubwomen to make strategic emergences into the larger social realm (see also Scott). In the writing class, there appeared to be multiple levels of “emergence” into larger publics which, in the case of the newspaper article published by the women’s athletics group, led eventually into the social sphere outside the classroom. Smaller “publics” within the writing groups (e.g., the Jewish men and the African American women in the night entry group) came together into a larger local public, the entire writing group. This group then reported back to the local group of the classroom to receive feedback both from the instructor and from the rest of the class. And finally, most groups at least attempted to aim their paper at an audience outside the classroom. Each shift represented a movement into a different level of risk, interpersonal relationship, and institutional structure, and the different levels may have allowed the development of multiple, often very small, public and private spaces, each of which allowed different modes of presentation of the self and the group. What this shows is that there were multiple levels of “service learning” going on in these projects.

We assert that a “public” model of service learning begins to respond to the limits of a “caring” approach to service. In “public” service, we must create structures that allow those who are “served” to become more active members of a public space where the differences participants bring with them become productive and crucial contributions to the development of the common project, “fueled with a new vision of service through cooperation rather than domination” (Maybach 235). In fact, service efforts like the one we have described that focus on the needs of the students’ campus community may make it more difficult for students to treat the “others” they meet there—often their own peers—as less than equal participants, countering students’ tendency to assume an attitude of noblesse oblige. As one of our reviewers pointed out, moreover, “there is a need for and a real interest in on-campus service projects.”

The approach we have discussed does not represent an unrealistic attempt to eliminate all inequality, but instead seeks to create practices that might both foreground inequality and take advantage of “difference.” This may mean promoting multiple public spaces within larger ones, as both Iris Young and Nancy Fraser point out. Thus, the fact that in the union night entry group the two subgroups
wrote different sections of their paper can be seen as a productive outcome. Although the paper fit together quite well, the Jewish men and the African American women maintained, nonetheless, their own spaces within which to speak. Thus it is probably more representative of a common public space because these separate voices were maintained.

The creation of “public” efforts that explicitly reach out to new communities, as Herzberg’s project and “Learning Communities” did—even if the students remain on campus—is crucial to ensure the development of public practices that do not become exclusionary. Throughout history we have examples of “public” spaces that excluded those who were “other,” including, of course, the Greek polis, which defined only propertied men as truly human (Arendt, Human Condition); even the white, Protestant, middle-class clubs formed by women at the turn of the century, despite their many positive aspects, often excluded and stereotyped working-class women and women of color (Gere). Outreach efforts that attempt to include those from different communities as relative equals (even if they can never entirely succeed) may serve to destabilize any group identities that would otherwise be supported through the monolithic “othering” of outside groups (see Connolly).

Instead of assuming that what they offer is automatically of use, students need to discover how they might contribute to a local context with a history and set of complex issues all its own. “Public” service requires a different approach to the literacy skills students take with them into a service context from that encouraged in the practice of tutoring. Students need to begin not as teachers but as learners in a community setting, where the goals and purposes of a “service” effort are not established beforehand. Perhaps students would see the contexts or agencies in which they were offered entrée as places where they would be given “assignments” in the way that Linda Adler-Kassner describes as working for her “at-risk” students. To be successful, service learning projects need to create spaces where college students are given opportunities to be “cared-for” by those they wish to serve, moments where they require initiation into the practices of a community they do not understand, moments where they are the learners instead of the experts, as all participating negotiate common projects together. We are talking “contexts,” here, because “public” service would require students to enter relationships with communities and not with easily isolated individuals. In this approach, the activity of service learning itself may provide an opportunity for students to rethink the nature of literacies and discourses as they operate in different communities.

**English and Service Learning**

In his recent book, *The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies*, Michael Bérubé explores what he describes as “the profession’s competing . . . fiscal and intellectual imperatives,” arguing that two current crises, the
lack of decent jobs for most new PhDs and the struggle between literary and cultural studies, should not be considered in isolation from each other. Bérubé issues a call for cultural studies that “articulates the theoretical and critical work of the so-called public intellectual to the movements of public policy” (322), an articulation that would lead the profession of English toward greater involvement with public politics and policy. Yet, even as he makes this recommendation, Bérubé expresses a healthy skepticism about the value of inserting policy into cultural studies. As he says, we might “underestimate—or, worse, ignore—the difference between theoretical work on such subjects [debates over race, ethnicity, clothing, cuisine, music, science, and technology] and the practical political effects such work can have for the people we’re talking about if not necessarily to” (337).

Bérubé’s hesitation hinges on differences he perceives between two “publics,” the literary public sphere and the public policy sphere and the fact “that most cultural studies intellectuals, myself most assuredly included, have not yet begun to think seriously about how best to negotiate that difference” (340). As our discussion of the various dimensions of “public” service learning indicate, we share Bérubé’s concerns about the various meanings assigned to “public” and the implications of these for the field of English studies. Yet, we, like Bérubé, do not see the solution in backing away from the term. As he writes, “while we’ve been making the case against imposing or presuming a common American culture, the New Right has worked assiduously to destroy the material foundations of what can at least potentially sustain us as a common society. That’s why their attacks on the realm of the public are so important, and why it is so important that we reclaim and rejuvenate ‘the public’ in the name of the people” (342).

In our view, service learning can act as one entry point for English studies to begin this reclamation process because multiple public and private spaces, operating at multiple levels, allow myriad kinds of difference to emerge into dialogue. Fluid and fragmented spaces like these allow the complex and multifaceted nature of discourse, as well as its imbeddedness in large social structures, to be more effectively explored and contested. Service learning provides a way for those in positions of privilege and power in the university to place themselves in the positions of “learners,” as they request and negotiate entrée into communities, often disenfranchised communities, within and beyond their own and attempt to discover, in conjunction with those in these new communities, what they can offer to those they wish to “serve.” “Public” service focuses not on “helping” others but on joining them as relative equals in a common project of social change. Service learning projects can encourage us to engage in dialogue about (talk “to” and not just “about”) the implications of a specific literate activity for a specific context and to the specific goals we intend to pursue. This allows us to see the work of English studies, in all its different configurations, as always precariously poised between myriad locations, activities, and discourses—each with its possibilities and limitations.
Done effectively, service learning fits well into an English Studies that is reconsidering its own boundaries and internal relationships because it brings into classrooms discourses and activities in the world outside the academy, mediating the relationships between the discourses and needs of the academy and those of actual community contexts. As many have long pointed out, the idea of a classroom as separated from the larger community in which it is situated cannot be disconnected from the issues of power, oppression, and exclusion this disconnection involves. Service learning provides a means for faculty and students to complicate this idea of the “classroom” and the approaches to discourses, writing, and literacy that it constructs. But we must think carefully about how we take advantage of this opportunity. Despite our best intentions, if we are not careful we may end up reinforcing ideologies and assumptions that we had hoped to critique. How we step outside the classroom, how we enter into service learning relationships with communities beyond our own, will be crucial in determining our success.

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