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# Technical Communication, Participatory Action Research, and Global Civic Engagement: A Teaching, Research, and Social Action Collaboration in Kenya

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In response to recent calls for internationalization and greater social relevance in professional communication teaching and research, this article links service-learning pedagogy with participatory action research (PAR) methods. A multi-year collaborative project in Kenya illustrates both the challenges and the positive outcomes of international partnerships, which include increased intercultural communication skills, significant contributions to the literature, invigoration of teaching and curriculum, and the development of global civic awareness among all participants. In their recommendations for faculty interested in developing similar partnerships, the authors highlight the importance of understanding the theoretical foundations of service-learning pedagogy and PAR methods, and advocate for the incorporation of exploratory site visits, pre-departure preparation for both students and faculty, critical reflection, efforts to ensure reciprocal benefits, and ongoing outcomes assessment.

In a recent issue of *Technical Communication Quarterly*, we argued for increased civic engagement through the implementation of service-learning in technical communication courses and curricula (Sapp and Crabtree). In addition to the applied theory and experiential learning opportunities service-learning creates, this pedagogical approach also provides students with an education in engaged citizenship. In that article, we introduced our commit-



ment to and experiences with civic engagement in U.S. settings and joined other scholars who encourage professional communication faculty to connect their teaching to exigencies in their local communities. In this article, we extend our own work on professional communication and civic engagement by arguing that the scope of professional communication research should be broadened to include global awareness, intercultural communication skills, and civic engagement through meaningful teaching and research partnerships across cultures. In keeping with recent calls to make research relevant to those most in need (e.g., Ansley and Gaventa; Frey; Frey et al.), we especially encourage the creation of partnerships in developing countries and with groups who are most marginalized in the current world political order and information economy.

In the first half of this article, we explore the philosophical, epistemological, and methodological underpinnings of developing research agendas that make connections between technical communication and global civic engagement. Central to this task is our argument that participatory action research offers an ideal model for international collaborations among technical communication researchers and colleagues abroad by focusing on specific needs, problem

solving, and the development of global civic awareness and action among all the participants. We examine different models of global partnerships, and we propose eschewing a charity-type model in favor of a more participatory one and believe in being vigilant to avoid neo-colonial relationships characterized by one-way dissemination of

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knowledge, opposite flow of resources, and manufactured dependency (Ansley and Gaventa; Kahn and Westheimer; Whyte).

In the second half of this article, we describe a partnership that involves technical communication research and social action in Kenya. For seven years, the first author has been involved in a sustained collaboration with a Kenyan non-governmental organization (NGO), focusing on environmental, technological, and civic development issues. This partnership illustrates several of the mutual benefits arising from a commitment to international research and



social action. Potential elements of such a commitment include establishing co-authoring opportunities with international scholars in developing countries, sharing access to external and internal funding sources, and encouraging increased visibility through scholarship that benefits understudied and marginalized regions. Although the collaboration described in this article is primarily a research endeavor, examples of and opportunities for student involvement are also discussed, including independent studies using a service-learning framework for students in Biology, Communication, and International Studies.

**Although international collaborations involve substantial time, resources, and commitment, they are tremendously beneficial to participating individuals, institutions, and communities, and function to build frameworks for a more peaceable and equitable globalization.**

We conclude by addressing the pragmatics of international collaborations and partnerships in developing countries, making specific recommendations to professional communication researchers, scholars, teachers, and practitioners. While it should be clear although such international collaborations involve substantial time, resources, and commitment from all parties involved, they are nevertheless tremendously beneficial to participating individuals, institutions, and communities, and function to build frameworks for a more peaceable and equitable globalization.

### **The Starting Point: Internationalizing Technical Communication**

Most members of the field of professional communication agree that it is important to prepare ourselves and our graduates for research and employment opportunities in global settings. For example, in the May 2001 issue of *Intercom*, Lena Jacobson offers insights based on her recent trips to Russia with several other technical communicators. Jacobson recognizes that recent changes in Russia have “opened new possibilities” (5) for US-based technical communicators. However, she points out that in order for our graduates to succeed in similar settings, they need to become more aware of historical, economic, and cultural factors complicating the practice of technical communication in international settings. Clearly, as technology has expanded global markets, so has the need for our technical communication graduates to develop skills for multinational and cross-cultural settings.



Our graduates are not the only ones who need to be more aware of multinational and cross-cultural settings. As teachers, we must also position ourselves as civic-minded researchers, scholars, and practitioners of technical communication in global settings. Timothy Weiss proposes the metaphor “ourselves

**We endeavor to develop research programs that promote global civic engagement, bringing communication research and skills to problem solving in the interests of the many rather than of the few.**

among others,” seeing technical writing as “bridge-building” shaped by matching needs and resources across cultures. Thus, what are referred to as “target countries” in business and marketing parlance, become opportunities to learn, not merely opportunities to conquer. Concerns over business opportunities seem to be the focus of almost everything in our capitalistic

culture; nevertheless, it is in our best interest as technical communicators to develop skills to become better global citizens: humans who teach and learn, profit and share, and take turns accommodating others’ needs.

Thus, we begin with a challenge to the conventional connection between technical communication and the international community, which is largely focused on facilitating the globalization of commerce or the “glocalization” of products. Although that focus which primarily serves the best interests of the U.S. market economy, the global market economy in which our work as professional communicators is increasingly valued reflects vast and exponentially growing global inequities in power and resources. Benjamin Barber notes that “at the same time that globalization’s influence is becoming an ineluctable presence, the character of globalization is becoming ever more skewed” (“Globalism Nightmare” 1). Indeed, the colonial history, market bias, and corporate monopolistic character of contemporary structures of globalization have produced gross asymmetry in the experience and distribution of benefits of globalization. We endeavor to develop technical communication research programs that promote global civic engagement, bringing communication research and skills to problem solving in the interests of the many rather than of the few.

Our approach to technical communication research in global settings represents a radical shift in our discipline. Based in a non-profit ethos as well as



the traditions of participatory action research and service-learning pedagogy, collaborations such as the one we describe in this article are efforts to build international competency and awareness, to create meaningful partnerships with colleagues in developing countries, to engage in democratic research practices, and to contribute to the global civic engagement of all participants.

### **The Call: Teaching Civic Engagement in Technical Communication**

Civic engagement is commonly understood to involve any number of activities from voting, participating in civic organizations, promoting awareness of issues, and building responsibility to neighborhoods and communities to direct involvement in politics through candidacy. Important at every level of civic engagement is the ability to understand as well as construct meaning orally, in writing, and in multi-media formats. The ability to send and receive messages and to engage in dialogue across differences of opinion is central, as well.

While evidence exists that the call for increased civic education is producing positive change through organizations such as Campus Compact, the creation of service-learning programs, and other initiatives (e.g., Ehrlich), there is cause for vigilant attention to the state of civil society in the US (Barber “Democracy at Risk”; Boyer; Gabelnick; Gamson) and growing need for students to engage questions of service and justice globally. Thus, Barber argues, college students must be taught to develop greater awareness of their communities and the world, modeling ethical leadership, committing to service for the common good, and learning to experience the world with stakeholders from many different viewpoints and life circumstances. As technical communication scholars, we share the responsibility to nurture the willingness to accept the full charge of citizenship among ourselves, our colleagues, and our students.

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By offering opportunities for students to critically analyze international problems in situ, service-learning provides one strategy for helping our students to connect their academic learning with the needs of the broader community and with their own rights and responsibilities as citizens. Service-learning includes a combination of all of the following four characteristics: academic



learning of disciplinary course content; relevant service that enhances academic learning; critical reflection through personal, experience-based and analytical writing and discussion; and deliberate civic education (Howard; Bringle and Hatcher; Zlotkowski). In addition to facilitating cognitive learning and the development of civic awareness for students and faculty alike, service-learning helps students develop an understanding of the world as an interdependent system (Hartman and Rola) and increases global awareness and concern (Myers-Lipton).

While our call for technical communication partnerships in developing countries challenges disciplinary boundaries, especially with its focus on global citizenship, we are not alone in our argument for an increased emphasis on civic engagement in technical communication. Some of our colleagues, including Thomas Huckin, Louise Rehling, Leigh Henson, Kristene Sutliff, and Elisa Stone, as well as many of the contributors to this special issue of *Reflections*, have explored ways that service-learning can provide professional and technical communication students with opportunities to connect course concepts to exigencies in their communities. As these and other examples demonstrate, service-learning allows the application of technical communication skills and resources to community organizations, non-profit agencies, and government organizations in under-resourced areas, in addition to strengthening students' cross-cultural communication skills.

Engaging in community-based and international teaching and research collaborations creates the opportunity to experience professional life and citizenship in a broader context. In the following sections of this article, we explore some of our strategies for linking technical communication research with global civic awareness and responsibility.

### **The Framework: Participatory Action Research**

In order to facilitate the civic awareness and engagement of our students in democratic education and decision-making, our teaching and research practices should also be characterized by democratic processes. Service-learning provides a framework for connecting academic learning with civic engagement. A similar framework is necessary to link academic research with civic responsibility. Participatory action research is the companion research methodology in our efforts to promote global civic engagement.



Participatory Action Research (PAR) has developed over the past few decades as an alternative research paradigm to social science methodologies that posit research as a highly-specialized activity undertaken by experts, demanding researcher objectivity and detachment from the lives and social problems under study (Reason). Instead, PAR brings together communities and researchers to solve problems. It has been applied in countries on every continent of the world, in fields as varied as agriculture, health care, urban planning, information technologies, and adult education, in order to address social issues ranging from water quality, labor relations, and homelessness, to sexually transmitted diseases, welfare reform, and the digital divide (e.g., Hall; Moemeka; Mordock and Krasny; Rahman; Whyte). In his discussion of participatory inquiry, Reason explains that “the PAR tradition starts with concerns for power and powerlessness, and aims to confront the way in which the established and power-holding elements of societies world-wide are favoured because they hold a monopoly on the definition and employment of knowledge” (329). Similarly, Nancy Blyler, a long-time advocate for alternative practices in technical communication, uses a feminist and critical lens to describe relationships that exist between unequal partners (see also, Novek). Blyler asks us to rethink our choices regarding current research practices and to take steps to be more collaborative and less competitive.

While the degree of popular participation in various phases of participatory inquiry varies tremendously from project to project (see the special issue of the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* on community-based research for several examples), it is critical that there should be democratic interaction between the researchers and those among whom the research is being conducted. The definition of the problem, the research questions, the data collection and analysis, and the use of findings must be relevant to those whose lives and problems are being studied. PAR includes collective investigation, analysis, and action aimed at long-term and structural change in addition to short-term local solutions. It offers a model for collaborations between technical communicators and global communities by focusing on specific needs and problem solving (see Grabill).

The compatibility between service-learning and participatory action research is easy to see. Service-learning links academic study with relevant experiential learning; PAR combines social investigation, educational work, and action.



Both require deliberate civic education, and both expect to create increased civic engagement as an outcome among participants. Kenneth Reardon, professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Illinois, highlights these commonalities in his article, “Participatory Action Research as Service Learning.” One of the criticisms of service-learning is that the students and university often benefit more than the communities where service takes place. Reardon argues, “When university research into the causes of social problems does not also address potential solutions, it is viewed by the community as meeting campus research goals without responding to community needs” (57). PAR projects combined with service-learning programs involve local communities, professional researchers, and students as co-investigators of social problems. Both approaches to community-university collaboration promote the development of analytical, organizational, communication, and advocacy skills among local community members and student participants. Within a participatory-action framework, such research not only builds the capacity of novice technical communicators and scholars, but empowers communities as collaborators in knowledge production and social action.

The project we describe in this article employs elements of both participatory action research and service-learning. Guided by the principles of democratic research described above, as well as by philosophies of education for liberation (e.g., Crabtree; Crabtree and Sapp;

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Sapp; Sapp and Crabtree), this is a collaborative research and social action project that, in some cases, involves students in alternative learning experiences or as co-researchers. For our colleagues and partners abroad, our students, and ourselves, this unfolding project cultivates greater awareness of the global condition and engagement

in the global public sphere, as we learn to both *critique* current injustices and *produce* new ways of being in global relation to each other.

### **The Case: An Environmental and Technical Communication Collaboration in Kenya**

For the last seven years, the first author has been involved in a sustained col-



laboration with an NGO in Kenya concerned with environmental, technical, micro-enterprise, and civic development issues. This collaboration has involved site visits, formal and informal educational exchanges, community outreach in Kenya and the US, and service work. The project grew from her trip to Kenya in 1997 as part of a delegation of development practitioners, international service-learning educators, and NGO directors. The purpose of the trip was to build a relationship with the Greenbelt Movement, a 25-year-old grassroots environmental project of the National Council of Women of Kenya. The experience also introduced her to several extraordinary examples of technical and development communication that deserve attention, research, and documentation.

The Greenbelt Movement (GBM) began in 1977 when a small group of women launched a tree-planting project as part of a grassroots struggle against desertification, deforestation, soil loss, and the resulting scarcity of wood for fuel and cooking. While these sweeping environmental problems were related to global systems of agricultural, economic, and cultural colonization, they affected the quotidian lives of women in the rural areas deeply and immediately. With the help of the Department of Forestry and the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, the Greenbelt Movement developed a national network of tree nurseries, trained people in the villages to tend the seedlings, and taught them about water and soil conservation. As the women and their villages became empowered by the results of their tangible environmental successes, the movement spawned other initiatives concerned with food security and biodiversity, civic education, micro-enterprise, reclamation of public lands, and advocacy for improved management of the nation's natural resources. Today, women and men in Greenbelt villages are organized and engaged in self-sustaining environmental, political, and economic development. What began as a reforestation movement evolved into a multi-faceted approach to grassroots activism and civic engagement among the most marginalized groups in Kenya.

As an outgrowth of the GBM's successes and as a revenue-generating effort, the Kenyan NGO developed what it calls an "alternative safari." Biology professor, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner, GBM founder, and executive director, Wangari Maathai intended this safari to educate tourists about the realities of life for the majority of Kenyans. In the conventional African safari, tourists



fly into Nairobi, stay in five-star hotels, join a four-wheel-drive photographic animal safari, and then fly away again. These experiences include little exposure to the realities of life in Kenya, which include abject poverty, desertification, disenfranchisement, an alarming rate of HIV/AIDS infection, and the dilemmas of balancing the desire to preserve endangered wildlife and limited natural resources with the needs of the fast-growing human population. In fact, typical tourist safari organizers hide these realities far from the tourists' gaze. The Greenbelt Safari, by contrast, is an educational and eco-tour of Kenyan archeological sites, wildlife preserves, rural villages, and urban self-

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help projects. These two-week encounters involve meetings with Kenyan environmental and political educators, a village home-stay including participation in daily GBM activities and service projects, an eco-friendly walking photographic safari in a non-commercial preserve, and exposure to urban

problems in the growing slums of Nairobi and other major cities. Through her association with the US NGO partner, Bridges to Community, the first author helped design the prototype "safari," continues to develop marketing to potential participants (e.g., college students, activists, and adventure tourists), and maintains ongoing collaboration in leading and assessing cross-cultural educational and service tours in Kenya.

Due to the unique communication challenges faced by GBM organizers, as well as by rural women in Kenya, this is an interesting site at which to study technical communication education and practice. The first author thus initiated a formal research project using participatory action research principles focusing on the communication strategies employed at the grassroots level by greenbelt villagers and the community organizers. For example, one collaborative team, comprised of both authors of this article and members of GBM community-based staff, is studying the various technical communication strategies used to instruct GBM villagers in preparing seed beds, harvesting water, creating tools for surveying terraced gardens, producing and applying organic insecticide, and record keeping. Some data gathering has been done by student "interns," former GBM Safari participants who return to Kenya to do independent studies using a service-learning framework.



The GBM includes a multitude of oral and written organizational and technical communication practices used to sustain and replicate its model of grassroots organization and reforestation. One strategy employs “skits” whereby women transmit the activities and benefits of GBM work to women living in neighboring villages so that they, too, can join the movement. In these mobile and embodied *documents*, women act out the process by which they became involved in the GBM, modeling both initial skepticism and growing excitement. Humor is also used as a persuasive strategy: one woman dons a fedora in order to play (and mock) the local chief; another shuffles a seemingly endless stack of paper both to point out the importance of systematic documentation of tree-planting efforts, but also to critique GBM for requiring what the villagers perceive as too much paperwork, revealing a tension between print culture and oral culture.

The successful delivery of these kinds of technical instructions is crucial for the success of the GBM, and while many of these practices are not recorded or delivered in writing, they are indeed exemplars of technical *communication*. With high adult illiteracy (especially among women) and a strong oral tradition, face-to-face interaction such as individual and small group tutorials, public presentations, and dramatizations are vital channels for the communication of complex technical information. Studying these forms and their relationship to Kenyan communication norms and cultural values can make a significant contribution to understanding technical communication in international settings quite different from what is learned from multinational corporate partners.

A second aspect of the research in Kenya involves studying the nature and impact of the cross-cultural encounter created by the Greenbelt Safari (GBS). For some college students, the GBS is part of a service-learning experience where formal study precedes a safari. Critical reflection is a significant component of the safari as is global civic education. The GBS produces opportunities for increased global awareness for the visitors and hosts alike; the hope is that members of both groups will emerge from the cross-cultural encounter more empowered as citizens in their own countries, with a greater sense of global citizenship, and ready to act as change agents in their respective societies. Members of the US and Kenyan NGO staffs, in collaboration with the first author and some of her undergraduate students, are engaging in



assessment research to determine the impact of this cross-cultural experience. The research team hopes to ascertain whether the cross-cultural encounter within a participatory development project produces increased global awareness, a mutual sense of empowerment, and greater civic involvement among safari participants, community and village members, and the GBM staff.

One such project during the summer of 2002, involving a mixed group of academics, students, clergy, and general public who collaborated with the community of Mbilini in the Eastern Province to renovate a community well, illustrates the cross-cultural and participatory development dynamics that occur on a GBS. Funded by UNICEF and managed by local engineers and chiefs, the project was to transform a muddy area surrounding the community faucet where women and children waded waist-deep to fetch water into a functional well with environmentally sound run-off mechanisms. By working

side-by-side with local people, the visitors learned not only about the transformative power of hard physical labor, but also about local engineering practices, water management, and the coordination of experts and lay people through effective communication.

**Kenyans also have much to teach us about technical communication education and practice, as well as about sustainable technology and development.**

There are multitudinous opportunities to provide technical assistance to Kenyan villages; however, this experience reminds us that the Kenyans also have much to teach us about technical communication education and practice, as well as about sustainable technology and development. When nearby villagers returned the next day and took their water from the new well, it punctuated the power of self-determination, collective action, and collaboration. This was global civic engagement in action.

### **International Collaborations in Civic Engagement:**

#### **The Challenges and Benefits**

While the scope and objectives of this collaboration with the Greenbelt Movement are impressive, the project is also fraught with many challenges, and we would be remiss if we did not openly acknowledge the many barriers to developing international collaborations in civic engagement. Working in developing countries often means enduring some physical hardships. For example, while living in greenbelt villages, visitors forgo running water and



plumbing of any kind, and work long hours in the tree nurseries alongside the villagers. Local people must be trained carefully in sanitary food and water preparation for visitors in order to avoid serious illness. This example reinforces the importance of collaborating with grassroots NGOs; the GBM provides advance preparation for visits.

While English is one of the official languages of Kenya, linguistic barriers are nevertheless prevalent at the village level, where many of the local women speak only Swahili and their tribal language. Here again, NGO partnering is vital. In the case described in this article, GBM community organizers function as translators for formal and information interaction among participants. In addition, as Jacobson reported in the Russian context, Kenyans do not necessarily recognize the term “technical communication”; thus, it is necessary to negotiate a common understanding of the discipline. Even for those participants with formal education, technical and development communication theories and principles might be subsumed under their training in environmental management or community organizing; the participants in such collaborations rarely share a common knowledge base or even a common vocabulary. Dialogue among those from North America and Kenya continues to serve as a form of negotiation about what the term “technical communication” means in the Kenyan context. In other words, the process of socially constructing these kinds of meanings and assigning names to tasks that have long existed in the culture but have rarely been discussed in academic circles are fascinating learning opportunities for participants in both settings. The PAR framework further reminds us to resist the temptation to impose academic (and Western) understandings and language on local practices, to use dialogue as a methodology of research praxis, and to study processes, produce knowledge, and engage in action meaningful to all participants.

Given this process, and similar to most qualitative and international research, this project has proceeded very slowly. In order to respect the priorities of the Kenyan partners (whose focus is on daily survival and community development) and to earnestly apply PAR methods, the research unfolds at an exponentially slower pace than our doctoral studies made us expect or tenure and promotion clocks might demand. Communicating during this process can also be challenging, as few Kenyans have regular access to a computer, a fact that highlights the so-called “digital divide.” Most individuals in Kenya do



not have access to the Internet or own their own computers; software and hardware are often outdated; and while most NGOs have Internet service, connections are not predictable. A desire to incorporate students and service-learning opportunities as much as possible also slows the research process.

Sometimes political concerns are deemed extraneous to or operate under the radar of most professional and technical communication professionals.

Additionally, international collaborations necessitate confronting geopolitical

issues, including the very real dangers that exist when people promote self-determination and seek social justice.

For example, the most recent GBM research trip was cancelled due to the political tensions emanating from US actions in Iraq. East Africa is identified as a “high risk” area by the US State Department, and severe travel warnings inhibit cross-cultural collaboration. Moreover, despite efforts to democratize the country, the political

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situation in Kenya can be volatile. As a grassroots empowerment organization, the GBM has been the target of government wrath on several occasions over the past 25 years; Wangari Maathai and other GBM staff and local activists have been the subject of harassment, brutal attack, and imprisonment.

During the 1999 GBM safari, the US embassy in Nairobi was bombed; fortunately, visitors were safe in the homes of a rural Greenbelt village and knew nothing about the bombing, though their families and friends in North America were understandably worried. Obviously, not all international collaborations are fraught with these particular challenges. Scholars should build partnerships based on their own contacts, cultural and linguistic skills, and political sensibilities.

Clearly, international collaborations entail inevitable challenges and difficult choices. Given our previous work in Central America and Cuba, we must also consider the degree to which some Americans might believe that such collaborations provide “aid and comfort to the enemy.” Nevertheless, global civic engagement necessitates maintaining awareness about the world situation,



understanding complex cultures and contexts, developing a critique of current unjust global relations, and taking responsibility for producing international relations that are not constrained either by vast geographical distances or wartime rhetoric.

Despite the concerns we raise, this project also illustrates several mutual benefits. For example, we have developed a framework for future educational exchanges (especially for graduate students) between Kenya and the United States. Professor Maathai envisions international graduate students becoming research partners with students at the University of Nairobi in fields as disparate as biology, political science, anthropology, and environmental studies. Greenbelt villages also provide a network of service-learning and community-based research sites; a few undergraduates have already taken advantage of these opportunities on semester-long independent study projects. One student, with a double-major in International Studies and Environmental Studies, wrote a brief history of the GBM and continues to collaborate with the first author on the larger project. Another student conducted a semester-long service-learning project in community organizing and ethnographic research methods.

This cross-cultural and interdisciplinary collaboration also promises to make unique contributions to the literature. The service-learning and research collaboration already has revealed much about technical communication that is not taught in US colleges. Participating students learn about oral technical communication strategies that are very different from the high-tech professional presentations they practice in the classroom; they also think about document design that facilitates Greenbelt villagers' data-gathering efforts in an environment where literacy cannot be taken for granted, and where paper and writing supplies are scarce and relatively expensive.

A multi-authored book project has also been initiated. The book is envisioned as a collaboration between the first author of this article, Wangari Maathai (the founder and executive director of the Greenbelt Movement), and a few of the Kenyan community organizers who work for the GBM at the grassroots level. The book will function as an historical document charting the development and evolution of the GBM, as well as a research report on GBM programs and progress. It will combine the theoretical framework of partici-



patory development with descriptions of the complex communication strategies that help GBM villages organize, create self-sustaining projects, and mobilize politically. With the exception of Wangari Maathai, who was the first woman in Kenya to earn a Ph.D. and who now serves in the nation's parliament, by and large GBM staff members do not have the educational background or the writing skills to engage in this project without assistance. While some of the staff members have attained an undergraduate education in fields such as environmental studies and community development, their jobs do not allow them time to engage in data analysis and writing. Other staff members hope this project will prepare them for future educational opportunities, perhaps graduate study in Europe or the United States. While all participants affirm the importance of documenting the GBM, the first author provides access to publishers and funding sources, technical support, research assistants, and a long-term commitment to the research process while others focus on the movement itself.

International collaborations also have the ability to impact teaching and curricula at participants' home campuses. For example, the first author uses many examples from Kenya in a variety of her courses; these examples not only make course material more vivid for her students, but increase her credibility in the classroom. The second author is developing case studies for his course in international technical communication from this project with the hopes of getting more students involved in the future. Just as our colleagues with ample industry experience often bring that "real world" into their classrooms, faculty experiences with international partners bring another "worldly" reality to explorations of course concepts and their application. These projects may also impact other faculty; for instance, the authors have urged their colleagues in environmental studies, nursing, and applied ethics to consider joining future GBM safaris. There may be opportunities to link the academic program with other university programs (e.g., community service offices and campus ministries) through faculty and student participation in programs like the one in Kenya. Importantly, through their participation, students may make different choices for thesis research or post-graduate employment and education; one former participant is currently working for an NGO in Guatemala, for example. All of these activities have the potential to impact the campus climate and culture in small and large ways as global civic engagement is articulated by different constituencies and reverberates through myri-



ad levels of the university (e.g., curriculum, co-curricular activities, alumni activities, and so forth). We hope that our students and colleagues are also inspired to do similar work. Our presentations on campus have additionally led to heightened interest in service-learning; in fact, the University Trustees Advisory Council has become intrigued by the possibility of developing of a service-learning center on our campus.

As Barber argues, a genuinely democratic global culture involves links between and among civic associations “represented by NGOs, churches, foundations, [and] citizen organizations” (“Democracy at Risk” 41). The collaboration between the first author, her students, and NGOs in the U.S. and Kenya illustrate the ways communication scholars can develop international projects that raise global civic awareness and build long-term research partnerships for social change. Moreover, this kind of collaboration is personally gratifying in ways that most research is not. The relationships, the transformational power of cross-cultural immersion, and the consciousness-raising that result from global awareness and engagement can all fill one’s life and heart with hope.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

To conclude this discussion, we offer some suggestions regarding the pragmatics and ethics of developing partnerships for global civic engagement. While some of these recommendations might apply to many disciplines, we focus on particular issues of interest to technical communication researchers, scholars, teachers, and practitioners. This list of suggestions is not at all exhaustive, but arises from the literature we discussed, as well as from our own experiences.

**Theoretical and Philosophical Foundations.** We urge our colleagues to read widely on topics such as service-learning and other alternative pedagogical practices, international and intercultural communication issues, and participatory action research methodology, as well as to learn about partner countries and cultures. Of note, recent articles in *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, and *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* have reported impressive implementations of service-learning components in technical communication courses. James M. Dubinsky’s article in the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* traces these roots back to classical rhetoric and provides a compelling



philosophical rationale for civic education that is deeply connected to teaching professional communication. Melody Bowdon and J. Blake Scott's useful textbook on service-learning in technical communication focuses on the pragmatics of a service-learning approach to professional communication and provides many examples of projects. The American Association of Higher Education has published several volumes on service-learning in the disciplines; Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters' edited volume, *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition*, remains a key source, providing much rationale and social vision, as well as thoughtful essays about the role of reflection and teacher praxis.

While we are often motivated to read the pragmatic literature, both for its brevity and its immediate practicality, we strongly encourage delving into the more philosophical literature, as well. For example, in our own work on this subject, we begin with John Dewey's arguments about education for democracy, explore Paulo Freire's theories on emancipatory pedagogy, examine how scholars in composition studies have applied progressive pedagogical theory, and include foundational arguments made by Ernest Boyer, Benjamin Barber, Faith Gabelnick, Zelda Gamson, Richard Kraft and others in fields as varied as political science, education, and philosophy. This work has links to a variety of ideological and epistemological debates in academic and political arenas alike, and it is rife with ethical dilemmas. Reading the literature forces scholars to confront dilemmas, rather than adopting the easier stance of doing "good" (or charitable) work. Philosophical debate forces us to recognize and exist within a necessary state of ambivalence, which seems appropriate for people like us who have untold privileges and unconscious prejudices yet nevertheless feel compelled to act in a complex and troubled world.

**Initial Site Visits.** Initial site visits are critical to developing international partnerships. Initial site visits can begin with general concerns (rather than only technical communication issues) and can evolve into opportunities to explore future collaborations related to specific research and teaching goals. An important aspect of the initial visit is creating networks among universities, local agencies, and NGOs, as these organizations may provide substantial support and organizational structure for future visits. Especially if student travel will be incorporated into projects (e.g., winter term or spring break immersions as extensions of technical communication courses), US and inter-



national NGOs can help with the travel arrangements, local housing and transportation, and other logistics so that faculty may remain focused on the learning objectives or the research agenda. Some universities have service-learning coordinators who can also assist faculty; at our university, the office of international programs facilitates travel arrangements and manages the accounting for students if these are credit-bearing endeavors.

**Preparing Graduate and Undergraduate Students for Participation.** While some international partnerships, like the one described in this article, begin as research collaborations, we recommend involving graduate and undergraduate students in the process as much as possible. Graduate research assistants and carefully-selected undergraduate students can benefit enormously from participation. Of course, given the sometimes intense emotional and ideological dimensions of this kind of work, these experiences are not necessarily for all faculty, much less all students. Attention should be paid to preparing faculty and students for cross-cultural immersion and the often unexpected return culture shock (see, for example, Martin's work on pre-departure and re-entry orientation programs). Campus international studies programs may have training personnel and materials, so preparation need not be the sole responsibility of the faculty. Part of preparation should also include teaching about research as social action, helping students develop research questions and methods appropriate to the people and context where work will be done, and supporting students' exploration of the complex ethical issues that are bound to emerge.

**The Role of Critical Reflection.** Developing reflection and facilitation skills is crucial to teaching global civic engagement, including the ability to manage contradictory and ambiguous information and circumstances without judgment. While many faculty members bristle at the use of "reflection" in academic learning, service-learning pedagogy requires it. Moreover, the nature of the cross-cultural encounter, the powerful cognitive dissonance that often results, the immense personal growth that becomes possible, and the awakening to global awareness are all phenomena with enormous disruptive and transformative power (see, for example, Kim's work on cross-cultural adjustment). It would be unethical to be unprepared to manage these issues ourselves in addition to helping our students with them. Literature in fields such as international education, intercultural communication, women's studies,



and composition explores reflective practices and their role in academic learning.

**Broadening the Scope of Research.** While our work, whether research or teaching, is shaped by disciplinary concerns and their application, global civic engagement requires widening the range of issues that we consider in order adequately to address the contexts in which the work is embedded. For example, even if a technical communication research project concerns collaborating

on documentation for computer software, meetings might be arranged with information ministries, members of social movements who organize via the internet, and local schools where computers are non-existent, in addition to the more expected meetings with high-tech companies and technical professionals. Similarly, while a service-learning experience may relate mainly to environmental and science

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writing projects, understanding the links to issues such as local health crises, patterns of urban development, and international business and trade policies can facilitate students' understanding of technical communication in relation to pressing global issues.

**Ensuring Reciprocal Benefits.** In order to maximize the mutuality of the benefits of international collaboration, we recommend co-authoring and co-presenting scholarship in both US and international venues (and in multiple languages) as much as possible. We must keep in mind that the history of international research by Western scholars mimics the colonial enterprise; data, like natural resources, have been extracted, turned into written products, and either sold back to the original country or rendered completely irrelevant to the people who supplied the data in the first place, serving only the interests of the scholar and his discipline. International collaborations should be seen as opportunities to share knowledge, and to participate in its production, dissemination, and use. In all, we should ensure a mutually-beneficial exchange of resources, information, and recognition. In a cogent and moving discussion, Maureen Porter and Kathia Monard use the Andean concept of *Ayni* to describe the kind of reciprocal relationship that is desirable in



international service-learning. Methods such as participatory action research build in such mutuality.

**Outcomes Assessment.** One of the contemporary challenges facing all of us in education concerns outcomes assessment. While immediate research and teaching outcomes are relatively easy to measure, there are a number of connected issues that should be included in assessment efforts (see Cruz and Giles; Cushman; Driscoll et al.; Gelmon; Hesser). For example, in Kenya, we are assessing the impact of the GBM Safari on visitors in terms of their academic learning, personal growth, and civic engagement. We also need to examine the impact of our visits on GBM staff, including their sense of empowerment in the work they do. The first author will interview members of GBM villages to determine the consequences of the visits on their attitudes and outlook. We are also interested in learning more about the impact of these visits on neighboring villages, which are aware of our presence but are not our hosts or co-workers. In sum, additional attention should be paid to evaluating the short- and long-term impacts of our work—teaching, research, and service—on the international communities with whom we partner, and the degree to which our work meets their short- and long-term goals (see Crabtree “Asking Hard Questions”). In addition to the results that we seek and the concerns we anticipate, there are often unintended positive and negative consequences that should be identified. These complex outcomes confirm that PAR methods are most appropriate for complex and meaningful assessment work.

International collaborations involve substantial time, resources, and commitment. Nevertheless, they are tremendously beneficial to individuals, institutions, and communities in the building of global awareness and civic engagement. Barber passionately believes, and we agree, that efforts toward global civic engagement “can guarantee that democracy and civil society will have a voice in how the world is organized and governed, and that global markets will serve not only customers but citizens, not only the private desires of wealthy consumers but the public interests of the world’s peoples” (*An Aristocracy of Everyone* 11). As communication researchers, scholars, teachers, and practitioners, we share the responsibility to make this vision of global civil society a reality.



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