



An (Em)bodied Workshop: When Service-Learning Gets Bawdy

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An (Em)bodied Workshop: When Service Learning Gets Bawdy explores the ways a student's perception about which bodies are and are not sexualized creates problems for that student when she attempts to run a writing group for senior citizens with Alzheimer's disease. This essay suggests that students engaging in service learning may import constructions of a mind/body split common in school settings to service learning sites as a way to authorize their presence in these sites. Students engaged in service learning need to be pushed to examine the ways their constructions of their work may erase the body.

I wasn't in control, at least not in the same way the other students in my class were when they went into their service learning sites. Almost everyone else was working with children, running writing workshops or afterschool tutoring groups. I was trying to get a group of senior citizens with Alzheimer's disease to write stories and poems. For the most part, my writing group liked me. But I wasn't in control. I was, in Betty's explanation, a *pisherkid*. "You know what that means?" she explained helpfully, "You pee in your pants."

My writing group howled with laughter whenever Betty called me a *pisherkid*, which was often.¹ I would laugh to seem good-humored, but it bugged me. I was twenty-five and in my second semester of graduate school. It was my first year teaching at the university and these senior citizens were disrupting my sense of myself as a teacher. I was



conceiving my work in this service-learning site as an extension of my teaching work in freshman composition. I knew I looked young, even to the college freshman, and I was trying to establish my authority, to figure out how I justified to my students and myself my right to lead a class. At that stage I was constructing my classroom authority around two poles: my greater age and maturity compared to college freshman, and my embracing of a life of the mind. I clung to the mind/body split, hoping my mind erased the ways age, gender, and size marked my body in the classroom. The seniors were having none of it.

“Look at your nails.” Ken and I looked at my hand, which was holding the pen I was using to transcribe his story. The nails were ragged from chewing. “You shouldn’t do that,” said Ken, “a writing teacher should have nice hands.”

When the classroom is mapped onto service-learning sites, what Tara Star Johnson calls “the Cartesian duality in education,” or the projected separation of body and mind, is transported as well. I suspect this mapping happens particularly when the service-learning site is an educational institution or when the service-learning activities are similar to “schooled” activities. In my case, running a writing workshop in a day center for seniors was close enough to teaching writing at the university that I transported an understanding of my position as “teacher” with me. Aureliano Maria DeSoto writes that “[a]ll professors utilize masks that denote various personalities, such as professional, friend, mentor, confidant, taskmaster, authoritarian, and curmudgeon” (217). The teacher “mask” I tried to hide behind at the Anathan Club was that of a disembodied professional. To pull off this masquerade, I needed those I positioned as students to assume a mask of disembodied writers. While I was successful at projecting this mask onto my university students, I was not able to project it onto the Anathan writers. They would call attention to my body in unwelcome ways: my nails were ragged from chewing, my youth was associated with peeing in one’s pants. More uncomfortably, the writers brought



their own bodies— sexualized and gendered—into our writing. In this essay, I explore how in my service-learning site my expectations about sexuality, formed from personal need and cultural constructions of both the elderly and the classroom, conflicted with my experience in ways that led me to shy away from potential writing opportunities. In undertaking my service-learning project I had constructed a narrative about who these people would be, but the seniors didn't fit snugly in the asexual roles I assigned them.

Maggie: [Looking at an advertisement] She better cover up in the front there.

Rickie: She's Miss Glamour Girl, she doesn't like doing laundry.

Maggie: She thinks she's hot. She's not hot.

Daisy: Wouldn't you like to have a figure like that?

Maggie: I have a figure like that. I couldn't wear a dress like that?

Daisy: Where would your boobs be?

Maggie: Up.

It seemed I was being let into a secret world in which elderly people talked about sexualized bodies, including their own. This was unthinkable to me: I had chosen this service-learning site—in fact, I had created this site on my own—as a way of processing my grief for my grandfather, who had developed Alzheimer's when I was ten years old. We had always been very close, and my family moved in with my grandfather to care for him when his disease made it dangerous for him to live alone. While the adults in my family began grieving for my grandfather when he developed the disease, I was not so willing to relinquish my belief that there was always something essential about him that couldn't be taken away. This romanticism is undoubtedly a typical denial response. However, I had not been able to fully purge myself of the suspicion that we never really lost my grandfather—who he seemed to be in the later years was just another shade of the man he always was. So, I became interested in the silence this disease forces on its captives.



Although he is writing about literacy among the economically dispossessed, I suspect that Freire's recognition of the "'culture of silence' [where] to exist is only to live" also speaks to the experiences of men and women with Alzheimer's (Freire 43). I wondered if writing wouldn't give people with Alzheimer's an opportunity to construct and communicate *their* reality. In his discussion of Hayden White, David Schaafsma states, "White makes it clear that stories give a necessary but illusory coherence to events. 'Real life' is obviously not coherent, not well made" (xx). The sense that all experience, regardless of the perceiver, is incoherent could serve to unite the "reality" of the person with Alzheimer's and the person without. I suspected that it was the lack of power to create this "illusory coherence" through "stories" that isolated people with Alzheimer's. I found instructive Schaafsma's realization about "the importance of seeing the world as constitutive—as provisionally constructed and endlessly open to reconstruction through language" (33). One horror of the disease is that, as it unweaves the fabric of the mind, afflicted people often realize that this is happening.

One of the challenges of working at this site was that it was unexplored terrain. Although there were several Internet sites in 2000 that highlighted the writing of caregivers—journals, poems, and websites—there were few instances of people with the disease producing written artifacts. Time slips, "a team of artists working with caregivers and people with Alzheimer's disease to encourage creative expression in Milwaukee and New York City," was one of the few sites that I found which could offer any tangible guidance in doing this kind of work. When I contacted them originally they had not developed their training materials, so I had to extrapolate from the writing they displayed on their website. Once I started at Anathan Club I realized how polished the pieces on Time slips were—there was a strong editorial presence. One of my goals in undertaking this project had been to be accepting and non-critical of the material the writers produced; however, the collaborative process itself seemed to require my taking a more active



role in the construction of the pieces. For example, I had solicited possible titles for the story I ended up calling “An Afternoon Out” from all five of the writers present. Suggestions included “A Rose is a Rose,” “Summer Winter,” “Purple Lilacs,” “An Afternoon Out,” “Carrying on a Conversation,” and “Three Lonely People.” When I was transcribing the collaborative story later on my computer, I wondered what to do with so many titles. At the top of the page I included all of the titles under a heading “Possible Titles,” but I did single out “An Afternoon Out” as the title of the story. I chose this title because it seemed to be the most logical fit with the story the seniors told; however, I worried that my picking one of the most prosaic titles diminished the power of the piece and reinforced the linearity of storytelling that I didn’t want to privilege. Another issue in collaboration was negotiating the nature of orality. Many of the seniors have lost the hand coordination to write, so storytelling literally involves *telling*. Traditionally, written work is valued over oral. However, in his discussion about grassroots working class writing groups in England, Gerry Gregory assures us that “[t]he ordering, reordering, and articulation of ‘experience’ into ‘knowledge’ can occur equally in the tape-transcription/writing partnership processes” (118). The primary struggle against the disease is the fight to keep available pathways of communication. As Christine Decker, Allied Health Grant Project Manager at Ithaca College Gerontology Institute wrote to me, “Family members and friends often drift away because the disease is confusing, and it becomes difficult to know what to do or say” (Decker). So, in many ways, I was embarking on a personal crusade, but I was going to discover that I was uncomfortable with the full expression of “my” writers’ humanity because it included sexuality.

Journal Entry January 21, 2000

First day —I was very nervous —felt unprepared. I got there (didn’t need to ring the bell, someone was coming out). The five seniors were already in the sun room along with two nurse’s aides. There wasn’t room for me to work —very awkward —I felt like I



came off badly —unsure. Finally I propped my paper up on a chair against the door. I introduced myself and met the seniors —shook most of their hands —then wondered if that seemed weird or unladylike to them. When I said I was in grad. school, Betty said “Mazel Tov.” I started by getting on my knees and moving from person to person with my big pack of markers, letting them each pick a color. I had been nervous about this, that it would seem too childish —but they seemed pretty happy about it and were invested in defining themselves through color choice. Then I showed them the picture —had to hold it up to each of them in turn because they couldn’t see it across the room. I asked for possible titles. Betty came up with a lot, but the nurses interfered —harassing others to give suggestions and suggesting things themselves. (I guess sometimes harassment is the only way to get participation?) I didn’t write down nurse’s suggestions but wrote all of the senior’s down. I was a bit chagrined —this didn’t seem how Time slips did it —it looked like they got one title and constructed a tightish narrative from there. But I decided it was more important to be accepting toward all their ideas. That’s one problem with the nurse’s presence —they harass the seniors when their suggestions are atypical like Betty wanting to name one character Green. I really want them to be creative, to follow the twisting of their minds. I wonder if I need to talk to Zehava [the director] about this. My mom suggested it might be important to make them stick to “reality.” But at this point I’m not comfortable doing that —I think it goes against my project of valuing the way their minds work WITH the disease. Making them anxious about jumping through hoops won’t help. We came up with a pretty funny story —newlyweds and chicken soup recipes. Mary was difficult —she sat in the corner with her stuffed cat and made it meow then scolded it —she told me she would never know anyone in the picture and that it was a stupid, boring picture. I worry that this is too elementary for her —apparently she writes letters, etc. Zehava



said she would love it if we could get Mary involved —she says it takes her a while, if at all to get comfortable. I read the story back to them and stayed after to chat with Martin and Daisy—she was born in Russia and moved here when five years old. Martin was a solid materials scientist.

From the very first day I experienced dissonance in my sense of myself as a “teacher.” The nurses attending to the seniors were much older than me, and I struggled to establish the ground rules for the workshop in the face of their expectations of how the seniors should participate. One of the seniors, Mary, had taken a strong initial disliking to me. She was a remarkable physical presence—six feet tall, dressed in a red and camel shirt and blouse with many heavy necklaces and pins—and I couldn’t ignore her. She also had a toy cat that meowed. She held conversations with this cat and would get it to meow and then scold it; I often suspected she was whispering to the cat about me. The writing topics, though, were exciting and were topics the seniors explored frequently: food and romantic love. It is interesting what remains integral in minds being whittled away by disease—the body’s appetites.

An Afternoon Out

By Daisy, Mary, Betty, Esther and Martin

It’s lunchtime but there is nobody in the kitchen. The woman with her back to us is Amy and the other woman is Carrie. The guy in the background is stupid looking —smoking. He looks lonely too. The man’s name is John. Carrie is a boy’s name. They are not the type of people I’d know anything about. They are talking about the weather and recipes for chicken soup.

Here is the recipe for chicken soup: take a good, nice, fat chicken. Cut it up. Put it in the pot with carrots and onion, maybe parsley. Celery. Season it with a little salt, pepper. Cook it until chicken is very tender. Let it just simmer. Put matzo balls in it. Matzo ball recipe is on matzo meal box. Chicken —chick, chick,



chick —cluck, cluck, cluck. Carrots, onion, celery and chicken. Crackers. Tie all the greens together. Celery, parsley. Tie them so you don't have to fish for them. You like the greens? You like to eat them? Okay, we'll give them to you.

Nobody's sick. Carrie is just a newlywed. She doesn't know how to make soup. Carrie has been married two months. Does she like being married? Sure.

Carrie is getting a recipe for salami and eggs too. Cut the salami then put it in the eggs. Mix it all in and then put it in the garbage! Onions, carrots, celery. I don't like salami and eggs.

Amy gives Carrie advice to work hard, to get up at seven o'clock. My mother used to get up very early to start fixing breakfast. She'd have dinner at noon. She'd make soup.

She won't stay married. She wouldn't know where to go. Everyone says get away from here.

Carrie works, she is a schoolteacher. After they leave the diner she'll do nothing. She'll go to department stores to see what's on sale. She teaches second grade; she is very nice. Her husband is a psychiatrist.

This story was written in response to Edward Hopper's painting, *Chop Suey*. I brought this in because it is an evocative painting, ripe for narrativizing. The gender construction in the narrative the Anathan Club writers built that first day would resonate throughout all the work I did with them for a year and a half. I remain intrigued by the compressed conflict in this story: Carrie, the newlywed, diligently seeking soup and salami and egg recipes, is doomed to divorce her psychiatrist husband. Although she is "very nice," she will be warned or threatened to "get away from here" when her marriage breaks up. Is the detail that Carrie's husband is a psychiatrist meant to suggest a negative trait or meant to suggest solidity in contrast to a schoolteacher who will spend an afternoon doing "nothing" and checking on department store sales? I suspect the latter because women often were negatively contrasted to men by the Anathan Club writers.



WOMEN

By Freddie, Betty, Daisy and Mary

If I never see another woman, it will be okay with me

They can be kind

They are good listeners

You can confide in a woman

They leave you alone

Their looks, their clothes

Chatterboxes

They can't wait to tell somebody

About

Somebody's divorce

There's jealousy existing in some cases too

They can be understanding

They are good listeners

They are gossipy

There are woman you can't trust

They pretend to be your friends

The majority are kind, helpful and loving

But it's the bad ones that spoil it for the rest of us

It's the same as men

They say people have a lot to learn from animals

Women won't kill unless they want money

Of course there are exceptions, but most women are caring



Women look like you
Women are nurturing

MEN

By Freddie, Betty, Daisy and Mary

Men are romantic
They make children
Finally the truth is out!

They are affectionate
They're always on the take
I like how much money he's got
Men are embraceable

Men are interesting, to say the least
I get along with them so much better than with women
Women are always telling me what I should do and what I
shouldn't do
Men would never do that

I like them, but they're not for me.

They know how to spend money
Poor guys, if they knew what we're doing to them!

These poems were written collaboratively and the polyvocality in them creates interesting conflicting claims: women are both gossips and good to confide in. Women are both nurturing and ready to kill for money. Animals are only referred to in relation to women, not men. Men are presented as manipulated by women. The women writing this poem strongly associated men with sexual expression; these "embraceable," "affectionate," "romantic" men "make children." This was a "truth" that the women laughed about.



I was very interested in exploring how the writers thought about gender—though it never occurred to me to ask about sex and sexuality—and I often brought it up in our writing prompts. The writers frequently referred to their mothers in our composing, most often to note how hard their mothers worked in their homes; their fathers were less three-dimensional in their memories than these mothers who worked from early morning to late evening cooking, sewing, and cleaning. While the majority of the women in our writing group had been homemakers like their mothers, two—Mary and Freddie—had been “career girls.” Mary didn’t talk about her work experiences much, but Freddie did. Freddie had worked in the truancy division of the New York City police department and had met her husband at work (he was her boss). She loved to tell stories about their wooing, fancy meals, and Broadway shows. She always choked up when she related warning her would-be husband after his proposal that she couldn’t have children following a car accident. There was a note of wonder in her voice, fifty-plus years later, when she described him telling her he was marrying her to be with her, not for children. It was at moments such as this, when I felt Freddie’s continuing sense of her own great fortune to find a man who wouldn’t reject her for her physical “limitation,” that I caught a glimpse of the vertiginous gap between these women’s life experience and mine. I wanted to know how they thought about the cultural construction of women.

Journal Entry January 28, 2000

Anyway, early on Daisy was talking about how she had wanted to be an actress. That gave me the idea of “Things you always wanted to do.” Well, the women did NOT like this topic very much.

Aborted attempt that became all of us shouting at them “Have you ever ridden a bicycle” - none had. Then, asked them if they danced, if they went to dances. This was more productive —Daisy had a lot to say. Esther had the least though she was having a great time. Originally I had called our project a collaborative poem, and she was apparently tickled by the poetry idea. And kept saying to me



“Roses are red, violets are blues, oh how I hate the sight of you.” This was a good laugh. When she first said it she laughed so hard she had to lay her head on the table. I pretended to be hurt and she grabbed my hand and said “Laughter is good for the soul.” She was in a great mood the rest of the time —singing and doing little dances with her hands. (Zehava was delighted with this since Esther had been pretty depressed since her recent move into the nursing home).

Things We Have Never Done

By Daisy, Betty and Esther

*I always wanted to be an astronaut and
Ride a bicycle, I rode one but didn't know how.
Did you ever ride a motorcycle?
No, do I look the type? Never rode a bicycle.*

*Years ago we used to go hiking.
George Washington Bridge.
Over there, over there, over there.
Those were the days I was able to walk good.
Entertaining you.*

The club's writers, all women at this point, were not interested in accepting my invitation to perform a feminist critique on their lives' limitations. I would never learn if Daisy never rode a bicycle because it was considered unfeminine or if there was another, more benign reason. The women writers delighted in talking about men and women's power over men. While my attempts at plumbing the social constructions of gender were thwarted, the writers were continually opening up discussions about sex. These were openings I steadfastly failed to exploit.



Crisis Point: Seniors Are Sexual Beings Too

Freddie: "You think only young people have those problems, romantic problems. Old people have them too."

I was having trouble getting the men of Anathan Club involved with the writing group. Often, they would absent themselves, going into another room to sleep. Then came Ken. A former shoe salesman and self-professed Lothario, Ken was an enthusiastic participant in our group. At the time I wrote that I thought he was "inappropriately sexual." This might be because of the circumstances of our first meeting. Halfway through the semester, the professors teaching Writing in the Community conducted observations of the students in our service-learning sites. The first time I met Ken was when I was observed by my professor; at the time I felt Ken had derailed our work in order to harass my professor. I recorded my frustration in my journal:

Catherine came to observe today but unfortunately I only had 2 people: Daisy and Ken (a character —first time I've met him). There was a bit of an icy snow storm so Access wasn't running and no one else made it. Today was a pretty short session so I could meet with Catherine and get to my student conf. (lasted only over an hour). My theme was trips and travel. Unbelievably Daisy has never been to the beach. She has only traveled to NY. We talked a bit about this and about Carbondale —I tried to get her to talk about giving birth (thinking about the journals I read from Britain) but she talked mostly about the locality of the hospital versus her town (actually makes sense considering the theme). Ken is a real dirty old man and has psychological problems —going to the hospital that night for electric shock therapy. (Found out later his daughter has some problems and doesn't take the best of care of him). He kept flirting with Catherine to the point of harassment..... what is my role in this situation? I felt totally inappropriate to reprimand him and Catherine seemed to handle him pretty well but he took us off course for a good portion of the time. When I did get



some storytelling going, say from Daisy, he interrupted loudly to harass Catherine. Not a good example of what I do but does show the possible obstacles. Catherine suggested that at times I stuck too much to the topic —there were moments I could have let Daisy go.

Ken had thrown me off balance, and I responded to that discomfort with written hostility. To my shame I characterized him as “a dirty old man” and seemed to think it relevant that he struggled with depression. In another response to this observation that semester I wrote, “I didn’t feel comfortable establishing boundaries for his behavior. I should have anticipated this sort of situation since Alzheimer’s wears down typical inhibitions—I had certainly observed that with my own grandfather. Nonetheless, I felt that it would be disrespectful for me to scold a man so many years older than me.” What strikes me now, looking back at my responses to this “incident,” is that I was infantilizing the members of my writing group. I chose to perceive Ken’s flirting as a symptom of illness rather than a normal human activity. As people I categorized as both students and elderly, I doubly erased the senior writers’ sexuality. Because I didn’t feel that I inhabited the body of a teacher of other adults, I was wedded to the possibility that bodies are superseded by the mind in teaching situations. And, of course, our culture commonly denies that elderly bodies are still sexual bodies. This erasure was central to my comfort with my position as “teacher.” I ascribed to the ideology Leda Cooks describes as associating professionalism with the invisibility of the body (300). If my body was invisible, naturally the students’ bodies were too. This was a necessary requirement if I was going to successfully function as “an *ideal* self, a moral and virtuous self” freed from the physical body (303). The members of the Anathan writing group refused to occupy this mental space and leave physical bodies behind. Moreover, they did not see me as pure mind: Ken pointed out the lack of physical control betrayed by my nail biting, while Betty continuously called me a *pisherkid*. Most of all, I was shocked that they talked about sexual desire in front of me.



Me: [Holding up a picture of John Waterhouse's The Lady of Shallot.] What story does this picture tell?

Maggie: Here, Ken, this is your type.

Irene: She's looking for her lost love.

Daisy: He died. He drowned. It looks as if she's looking for him.

Ken: She's looking for me.

Mary: He should live so long.

Mildred: She's thirty. Her name is Jezebel.

Me: Is she bad?

Maggie: No, she isn't. She just needs a man.

"She just needs a man." By this time it was more than clear to me that these "adorable" elderly men and women wouldn't believe Jezebel needed a man just to row her boat to shore. I had to rewrite the narrative I had tried to impose on my service-learning work. I had started this project looking, I think, to reconnect with my lost grandfather, who had been a widower my whole life and comfortably asexual in my perception. The writers at the Anathan Club wouldn't fulfill the roles I had cast for them as grandparent figures and they didn't censor themselves in front of me. As time progressed, and particularly when the semester ended and I no longer felt that I was being graded for my work at the club, I eased into relating to Ken and the other writers as full human beings. I found out that Mary was having an affair with Jim, an occasion which coincided with her brightening mood and increased participation in our writing group. I became more comfortable with Ken and with the fun had at my expense by the writing group.

Me: What is a good gift to give for a wedding?

Maggie: A waffle iron, electric skillet, an iron or dishes. Whatever you want. A bedspread.

Freddie: Depends on what kind of background they come from.

Ken: Prophylactics.



I noticed in time that I began to treat the writers the way Zehava treated them: as fellow adults. I laughed at their bawdy jokes and cringed when new volunteers spoke slowly and simply to club members. I discovered that I could shock Ken. We did a project that involved tracing our hands and then writing what our hands have done around and inside the tracings. Ken was very creative and talked about jobs, children and hygiene. He also leaned toward me and said, “Chased women, made love, wiped my backend.” When I duly wrote these phrases on his hands, he looked up at me with a blush. “Oh,” he said, laughing, “you wrote those down!”

Lessons from the Anathan Club Writers

Ken: They look like they're in love. They are going to kiss.

Maggie: Is that all? That's for teenagers; I'm an old lady.

My choice was not a popular one—I was the only member of the graduate-level Writing in the Community class at the University of Pittsburgh who chose to work with the elderly. My classmates were working with children, cancer patients, and adults in drug rehabilitation. These were more desirable communities to work with in part because of the challenge elderly bodies present, particularly to the young. Elderly bodies may be marked by incontinence, feebleness, and other reminders that the body fails us in the end. When I first undertook this project, I had anticipated these expressions of embodiment in my writers but I had never expected to find bodies that continued to be constructed as sexualized. I never expected that there would be secret trysts, which there were, and so much talk about the body and all of its functions.

This experience holds some lessons for me as a professor who has and will continue to incorporate service-learning into my own teaching. First, we need to encourage our students to honestly explore the narratives they construct about themselves in relation to the service-learning work they are doing. I had tried to impose a narrative about



myself unlocking the stories about historical events and life in different eras of grandparent figures. When the writers I worked with thwarted my expectations, I struggled and had to dramatically revise how I saw myself and how I saw the writers. I needed, in my journals, to take a second, reflexive step and examine what the events I recorded revealed about my prejudices and me. Second, before sending students into service-learning sites, we need to discuss how the students perceive their roles and the roles of those they are going to work with. Many students will, like me, seek to authorize their participation in these sites—particularly if they are leading educational activities—by mapping onto themselves the position of the teacher. We need to help students think through the assumptions they make about what teachers and students reveal about themselves to each other. We need to discuss the very real possibility that the students' experience will not match their expectations and, perhaps, even role-play potential interactions they may have with the participants. These moves lay the groundwork for the reflexivity about the role of the university in relation to the community and about the power dynamics of the classroom that service-learning is uniquely positioned to facilitate.

The Anathan Club writers helped shape me as a teacher. I remind myself that when students and teachers act as if we are all mind and no body, we are engaging in a collective illusion. I encourage my students to represent themselves as round, complex people and not one-dimensional, affectless "minds." But most of all, I glance uncomfortably at my bitten nails when I meet with students, and I still feel like a *pisherkid* more than I care to admit.



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Endnotes

- 1 I have changed the writers' names to preserve their anonymity.