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## Providing Context: Service Learning in a Community College Composition Class

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- Two problems catapulted Wendy Rihner into service learning:
- Hurricane Katrina's destruction of Louisiana's coast and the
- lack of context plaguing so many college composition courses.
- Rihner undertook a service-learning project with an English
- Composition II course in the spring of 2007 that radically
- changed her pedagogical philosophy. "Providing Context"
- discusses Rihner's desire to provide her students with a context
- for writing argumentative essays while raising awareness of
- the ecological disaster that is unique to Louisiana.

Last semester a colleague put me on the defensive. "Why bring your birdwatching into the classroom? Isn't that what you do to take your mind off of this place? Besides, students won't identify with that," she admonished me. I had just proudly announced to her that the next semester my English 102 class would undertake a service-learning project, the first of its kind. They would write a persuasive proposal, urging local politicians to support and fund Louisiana's bid to join the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Areas Program (IBA), a state-by-state bird habitat conservation plan.

"This semester, my students will put English 102 to good use," I boasted.

"Wow, that's neat," she responded flatly, "but who has the time to do extra work during the semester? God, isn't grading enough?"

Her questions were not unreasonable. I do teach five sections of composition each semester. Very few educators outside of the community college and very few from Delgado Community College, where I teach, know the enervating workload English instructors face. We have hard jobs and so many of us need that distinct separation between avocation and vocation. For many years, watching birds and working on coastal conservation issues have been my refuge from essay grading, my respite from reading some very insipid essays. Yet how could I admit to another instructor that I share some of the blame for the vapid essays I collect? After Katrina, a long simmering resentment of the English instructor I had become burned off the last of my creative juices. My instruction lost its verve, my assignments grew pointless without any context, and consequently, my students suffered from writing in the vacuum I created. Even as I fled the city before the storm, I had hoped the fall semester of 2005 would find me inspired once we returned from evacuation. I desperately needed an energy transfusion. But then Katrina blew in, eating up more of our coastal landscape. Her damage brought about a new urgency in everyone. I figured I would capitalize on that urgency, add a spotlight on bird habitat issues, help students polish their persuasion skills, and ultimately raise community awareness of a threat shared by all in Louisiana. I felt recharged.

Had I not been overwhelmed by an impregnable optimism, I would have registered my irritation with my colleague's inquest and answered her question with a question: why shouldn't composition teachers incorporate service-learning into their courses? Aside from offering proofreading skills and a smattering of critical thinking skills, most composition classes, I fear, are moving toward irrelevance. I needed to convey to students that writing means more than completing an anti-death penalty research paper for a decent grade. Because so many of my students come from communities with no voice and no clout, they need to be able to take a stand on the impending ecological disaster that is Louisiana's vanishing coastline. They may not care a jot about

birds, nor should they have to, but they care about economics, and more important, they fear the prospect of losing their homes to the Gulf of Mexico. Despite the unpleasantness of commingling business and pleasure, I finally found a context, at least for English 102

In October 2006, Delgado invited Tulane University's service-learning program director to campus to conduct a half-day faculty workshop. My dean suggested that I attend. Perhaps for the first time in a very long time, I brought a pen and paper, my ideas, and some energy to a professional development workshop. After that workshop, I signed up for a four-week faculty service-learning seminar to take place in November and had a new syllabus for the designated English 102 course by early December. Before Christmas, I identified the community partners who would participate in the project: the Louisiana Bird Resource Center (LSU) and the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Areas Program, the beneficiary of the persuasive proposal. The holidays approached, so I sat back and waited for the New Year. Even before the semester began, I knew that this one service-learning assignment would allow me to meet my goals: to provide a much-needed context for writing, to give students a real-world writing opportunity, and to reintroduce engaged citizens back into the community. No scales fell from my eyes, and no booming voice knocked me off my mule, but I knew this was my road to Damascus experience.

Before class met in January, I determined that the first half of the semester would be devoted to the proposal. I asked the community partners to visit class early in the semester to provide background information not only on birds and bird habitat but also on the agencies themselves. I then divided the roster into five groups and assigned each group a responsibility, for I felt the scope of this proposal could very well overwhelm students and consequently immobilize them. I identified three content groups: one would research the appeal Louisiana holds as an ecotourism (or avitourism) destination; another

would compile a few statistics on the profits Texas, Alabama, and Florida make from bird watchers; a third group would investigate coastal erosion issues threatening humans and birds alike. A fourth group would compile a list of elected officials' and tourism officials' addresses (and later compose the cover letter that would accompany the brochure when we mailed it). Finally, the fifth group was responsible for design, selecting photographs and determining the layout that would transform our text into an attractive, readable brochure.

At the end of January, the students met with their groups, and within a week and a half, the content area groups completed their research tasks. The layout team researched the available software for pamphlet design, and the "address" group identified the politicians most likely to be interested in the economic or ecological benefits of an IBA Program in their home parishes. We were ready for the community partners' visits.

On February 12<sup>th</sup>, the representative of the Louisiana Bird Resource Center came to class to discuss bird watching in general, its economic and recreational benefits, and the rich bird life found in Louisiana (nearly 450 resident and migratory species). On Valentine's Day, the director of the Louisiana Important Bird Areas Program visited class and gave a Power Point presentation that briefly traced the history of the IBA Program but focused primarily on how a well-funded program in Louisiana would draw attention to our coastline by preserving crucial habitat. Bringing the two community partners to class alleviated any of the logistical concerns that often arise in a service-learning course, and despite my concerns about student boredom, everyone enjoyed our partners' Power Point presentation. Additionally, the content groups supplemented the research they had already gathered.

It took several class meetings to turn research into useable text. Everyone in the content groups had to draft two paragraphs based on the research he or she had gathered; they photocopied those drafts and disseminated them to the class. Working together, we closely

examined each paragraph, adding, deleting, mixing and matching until we had three effective sections of text. The brochure started to take shape. Because habitat conservation plans contain scientific terms and complex ideas, I saved the most important section of the brochure, the one outlining the IBA Program, for last as a hands-on exercise for the entire class. From the National Audubon Society's website, we downloaded, read, translated, paraphrased and summarized the salient material we thought would most influence our readers. This work was tedious at times, but I have never felt more fulfilled as a writing instructor.

I don't believe a writing handbook can offer a more effective lesson on collaborative writing, paraphrasing, summarizing, revising and proofreading for a particular audience than can a service-learning writing project. Audience—what a beautiful word! We all learned this semester that even the most difficult writing tasks become much easier when we know our audience's needs. With an audience in mind, learning writers must focus on style, format, tone, and even the type of support needed to support their argument. Moreover, knowing that I would not have the final say over the brochure, the class wrote with their editors (the community partners) in mind. Mysteriously, grammar and mechanical issues became extremely important; no one neglected to flex her proofreading skills. This semester, my class stepped out of the classroom and into the world of the professional writer. Indeed, our persuasive brochure removed the limitations usually set by teacher-as-reader assignments.

The teacher-as-reader, perhaps even the students-as-readers, assignments keep students within academic boundaries. Consequently, many composition classes float in isolation not only from other academic disciplines but also from the real world. Context is lacking in so many writing courses, and maybe we should look to the textbooks we require students to purchase. Once the semester is finished, how many students will continue to read the *New Yorker*-style essays so

many of these texts anthologize? Are we guilty of trying to create miniature versions of ourselves? I believe many of us are, and that might be due to our training in literature and not composition. Again, at the outset my class showed no great enthusiasm over the idea of writing about birds, but once the students recognized their chance to voice their concerns to some important people, the context mattered.

Incorporating a service-learning component in a composition course, therefore, may quell some of the “What does this course have to do with me?” attitude instructors often encounter. How many times have my colleagues and I lamented the self-absorption of so many of our 20-something students? I certainly have spewed enough vitriol about that lost generation. We are not alone in our grief. Jean Twenge, a San Diego State University psychology professor, has the research to back up our complaints. She argues in her book *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*:

Far from being civically oriented, young people born after 1982 are the most narcissistic generation in recent history. Thirty percent more college students showed elevated narcissism in 2006 compared to 1982, making current college students more narcissistic than Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. (qtd. in Arns)

The causes for this narcissism are many. Yet, are educators partly to blame for this narcissistic tendency toward disengagement? Frank Newman, author of *Higher Education and the American Resurgence*, believes we are. Perhaps more than declining test scores, we should be concerned that America's educational system has not provided “the education for citizenship” (qtd. in Gottlieb and Robinson). Just by integrating one experiential writing assignment, instructors can make learning more meaningful, writing more relevant, and subsequently, a student's role as engaged citizen, more pronounced.

I may not have completely fought off student apathy this semester with one persuasive brochure, but I know that I reached some students. Their reflection essays written at the end of the semester reveal a lot. Mary reports honestly, "I was ashamed of how uneducated I was about my own home. I feel this brochure has made an impact on me." Merrily, an especially energetic and enthused student claims: "Therefore, if the senators and the mayor start supporting IBA projects I will be able to tell everybody: "Hey, my English class and I gave them that idea!" I guess that makes us, my class and me, true pioneers of the IBA movement."

Mary and Merrily remind me that my teaching has not linked learning with citizenship. I have taught thesis and development well, I can teach subject-verb agreement blindfolded, but I have neglected to show students how their reading and writing skills contribute to community. John Dewey conveys in *Democracy and Education*, that "a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated" (Dewey). His words have special resonance at the community college. After all, the mission statements of nearly every community college nationwide indicate their desire to return good people to the community. Delgado's mission statement asks that students "think critically" "demonstrate leadership," and "be productive and responsible citizens." How do writing courses fulfill a college's mission statement? We have met the "think critically" part, but I am not sure about how our writing courses fulfill the other two. Reading and writing are one thing; reading, writing and applying, however, maximize student success and create change.

Their reflection essays also ask students if they felt they developed a voice, if they felt they made that proverbial difference by working for the common good. Nancy responds: "I feel like I have more of a voice on what happens in my community, but also like I have learned some very important and necessary tools towards being able to have my voice heard and make a difference at any level." Antonio, ever the

confident young man, writes, “Yes, I feel this brochure will impact our community. Yes, I know I have a voice that has to be heard, and that is going to be heard through this brochure.”

Finally, I understand the many questions and even the hesitance many English instructors have about service learning. A few of my fellow instructors told me that they were slightly perplexed about the feasibility of service-learning in a composition classroom. When word spread that I would be Delgado’s first English instructor to participate in the pilot service learning program, I fielded questions about logistical issues. “Don’t most students go off campus to volunteer somewhere?” they asked. “Don’t they have to work at some community center for 10 hours a week or something?” But one of the beauties of service-learning is that it can be shaped to fit any syllabus, any course. Logistics pose no problem. Yet, I would be remiss if I did not reveal that familiarizing students with the birds of Louisiana and bird habitat issues took a great deal of time and effort. That had to be done first before we could make the connection between a bird’s need for an intact coast and mankind’s need for the same. Beyond knowing that birds sing in the morning and mess on the roofs of their cars, many of my students’ knowledge base extended no further. Perhaps the biggest mistake I made in organizing this project was having students jump into it at the outset of the semester. Easing into would have allowed more time to discuss argument and would have also prevented resistance on the part of some students. Those are valuable lessons learned.

Finally, if anyone should still wonder how service-learning fulfills a composition course’s requirements, he should look to the American Association of Community College’s *A Practical Guide for Integrating Civic Responsibility into the Curriculum*. A table entitled “Essential Civic Competencies and Skills,” reads much like the master syllabus of any argumentative writing course. The intellectual skills required of an engaged citizen—analyzing, interpreting, summarizing, presenting information—do not differ from our expectations of students. A



competent citizen and an “educated” student share participatory skills: learning cooperatively, gathering information, listening to others. Any student who has polished verbal and written skills can bring about positive change in the community (Gottlieb and Robinson).

In closing, I wonder how many students sitting in a persuasive writing course get to see the powerful influence of their writing. How many students think anyone other than their instructor and perhaps a few diligent and curious classmates will read their research papers? And if the 20-something crowd is as narcissistic as Twenge contends, wouldn’t such students want the attention such a project would bring?

Because we stand now at a point in Louisiana where all living things are threatened by an eroding and sinking coastline, I could not spend another semester focusing solely on abstract, distant topics that students usually do not relate to anyway. Experts say we, and “we” includes mankind and birds, have ten years before everything south of Interstate 10 is beachfront property. Even though conceiving and organizing this project taxed me and stunned students at first, the payoff has been worth it. My students produced a beautiful four-fold pamphlet, and we have already mailed it to the governor of Louisiana, the mayor of New Orleans, local tourism officials, and a few dozen state senators and representatives. And by the end of the semester, I will learn whether the National Audubon Society will use the pamphlet as a communication tool for their Mississippi River Delta program. Now, how many writing students can brag about that?

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