Michelle Navarre Cleary

Keep it Real
A Maxim for Service-Learning in Community Colleges

Is service-learning of value for community college students who have very limited time and who do not need to "be exposed" to the neighborhoods in which they live? Yes. Service-learning can be a vital bridge connecting community and college for students who frequently are the first of their family or friends to go to college, who have more confidence in their street skills than in their academic skills, and who see real needs in their communities. However, service learning will only benefit these students if it evolves from and responds to the realities of their lives.

Service-Learning Comes to the South Side . . .

A few semesters ago, a slightly harried dean informed the handful of faculty who showed up for a summer meeting that she had been mandated to implement service-learning at our school. Actually, she called it "in-service-learning," but we got the idea when she asked a few faculty members to talk about a service-learning conference they had recently attended. One colleague earnestly reported that "service-learning teaches students how the other half lives."

This definition prompted an image worth my trip into school that day: my students relaxing by the pool at an exclusive country club to learn how the other half lives. I teach at Olive-Harvey College, one of the City Colleges of Chicago. Located on the far south side of the city, Olive-Harvey is a community college serving students who have graduated from some of the worst-performing of the Chicago Public Schools. In 1999, our students reported their average family income as $10,679. Two thirds of the students are women; many are single mothers. Ninety percent of Olive-Harvey students are African American, eight percent are Latino, one percent are Asian and one percent are white (Talley). These students do not need to see "how the other half lives." They are "the other half."

The students at my school are typical of the under-privileged, under-prepared, and over-burdened students who populate many community colleges. Can such students benefit from participating in service-learning? I believe so. In

fact, community college students, unlike many of their peers at residential colleges, have double the opportunity to reap the benefits of a service-learning program as both learners and community members.

However, community college students will benefit from service-learning only if it responds to the realities of their lives as well as to their academic needs. The summer meeting I attended highlights some of the confused goals which can arise when community colleges try simply to import models of service-learning developed at four-year institutions. As service-learning is adopted and, increasingly, mandated at community colleges, the temptation is for stressed staff, lacking adequate models, to simply borrow wholesale from service-learning programs already in place, often at institutions quite different from their own.

This is precisely what our dean, having assembled a list of agencies in need of volunteers and a collection of forms to be completed, has tried to do—without much success. A very few faculty are making service-learning work in their classes. They were doing community-based work before service-learning officially came to Olive-Harvey and they will probably be the only ones who will continue to do so after it is officially forgotten. The majority of faculty treat service-learning as they do every other administrative mandate—as something best avoided until forgotten in the push for the next new thing. Of the faculty who did consider service-learning because of the current expectations, most quickly dismissed it as being unnecessary, unrealistic and even harmful for our already precariously overloaded students.

What is the Purpose of Service-Learning in Community Colleges?

To develop effective service-learning programs at two-year institutions, we must first interrogate our goals. Advocates of service-learning often promote it as a means of improving retention and empowering students. However, the accomplishment of these goals becomes doubtful and even suspect in community colleges.

Attrition is a significant challenge for most community colleges and improving retention has become a sort of Holy Grail for community college administrations. Therefore, administrators, in particular, take notice when told that service-learning will improve retention. I, in fact, attended one conference at which faculty members were explicitly encouraged to stress improved retention as the key to gaining administrative support for service-learning,(despite the presenter's confession that he had no data to support that claim. Given the many intractable social issues which cause our students to drop out, service-learning is unlikely to have much of an impact on retention. Instead, it is in danger of

becoming yet another way "to address" the problem of attrition without really having to grapple with its difficult social and economic causes.

How can service-learning significantly increase retention when our students are struggling with inadequate housing, health care, child care, and transportation while working in dead-end service sector jobs with little control over their schedules? Students who drop out because they were so badly beaten that they are suffering brain damage and can not keep up with the work (true story); who stay home to make sure repairs are done to their public housing apartment or risk losing custody of their children because of the dangerous living conditions (true story); who miss class three weeks in a row because their welfare case worker insists that they attend a welfare-to-work class rather than their college classes (true story); who miss class because they are trying to get themselves and their children out of a shelter before their next baby is born (true story); whose boyfriend/brother/cousin/best friend has just been shot (many true stories); who miss class because they are in court or jail (many true stories)—these students need many things to be able to stay in school, and a good service-learning experience is not at the top of the list.

When I have asked at conferences and workshops about what service-learning can do for my community college students, I have also been told it can "empower" them. "Empower," in this sense, means that service-learning can make students feel that they have something they can give to others, and so it gives them the sense of purpose that will keep them in school (yes, retention again). This certainly is an attractive argument for a population who, at first glance, seems to be always on the receiving end of society's largess. But it does not correspond to the lives of my students, nor to their self understanding. Many of my students are young mothers and often they are on welfare. However, if they have gotten themselves through the doors of my classroom, they are also young mothers who know how to struggle to get what they need for their families.

Far from charity cases, my students on welfare tend to be aggressive consumers of an inefficient and often hostile system. My students will tell you about lazy welfare mothers who just have babies to collect government checks, but not one of them (even those young unwed mothers on welfare) considers herself one of these women. They know they are out there doing for themselves, their children, their families, and their friends. It is naive, if not insulting, to assume that what my students need is a feeling of empowerment to keep them coming back to school. As they will tell you, they don't need to feel empowered, rather they need to *have power*: the power to get dependable child care, the power to secure quality health care, the power to find dependable transportation, the power to choose their jobs—power that they know only comes in our society with eco-

nomic might, which is why they are in school in the first place. They have figured out that education can open the door to some of this power.

Empowerment is not a bad thing—everyone needs to feel that they can and do make a difference in the world. However, "empowerment" as a goal is in danger of becoming a panacea for much more challenging social ills, placing the burden for addressing these ills on the shoulders of our students (who simply need to feel better about themselves) rather than on the social system. I'm not denying that many of our students have serious personal issues, however so do many of my colleagues, friends, family, acquaintances. To suggest that a feeling of empowerment will encourage students to stay in school is to personalize the challenges students are encountering in a way that allows us to avoid dealing with the more difficult root causes of these problems.

Keeping it Real

If service-learning in community colleges should not be driven by the goals of retention or empowerment, what should its purpose be? The power of service-learning for community colleges is its ability "to keep it real"—both to keep the work of the classroom grounded in the realities of the communities our students return to every day and to fulfill the obligation of the community college to help students bring their education home in order to address community needs.

Service-learning in the community college gives students the opportunity to "learn by doing" through hands-on, community-based work that is directly related to the academic goals of the classroom. This accomplishes a number of things. First, learning by doing is a proven method of teaching that is particularly pertinent for our students, many of whom are intimidated by the classroom and have more confidence in their ability to succeed in the "real world." Some of the best essays written by some of my weakest students were the result of a service project in which they had the opportunity to share their real world expertise—in this case, what not to do in high school—in letters to kids about to begin high school. The idea for these letters arose from my realization that the writing prompt "If you could go back to any point in time, what would it be?" almost invariably led to an outpouring of essays on going back to high school and doing things differently. After reading these essays for a couple of semesters, I began to wish that students starting high school could read them with me. A friend of mine was teaching at-risk eighth graders, so we arranged for my students to write to her students.

A year later, she left this job. I planned to find another school, but got distracted and dropped the assignment for a semester. Then, it occurred to me that I could have my students write to kids they already know. This worked even bet-

ter—the letters are now more passionate and more personalized. While leveraging the expertise students have gained in their lives and their desire to share this expertise, this assignment opens the door for discussing how writers adjust their voice to suit audience and purpose.

In addition to helping students move into the academic setting, service-learning, with its structured projects and instructor guidance, helps students transfer what they are learning in the classroom to what they do outside of it. An example of this learning transfer comes from a service project I developed out of desperation. A few years ago, I taught a developmental reading class in which I absolutely could not get the students to read. When I forced them to read out loud in class, their reading was so stilted and expressionless and the atmosphere so tense, that even I had a hard time comprehending what was being read. I decided to assign a service-learning project in which each student read ten books to children and then recorded their own and the children's reactions to the books. I sent those students who claimed no contact with children in their lives to our on-site day care center. I compiled their mini-book reviews into a class guide to children's literature. Each student received a copy of the guide and we donated copies to the library and the child care center.

The project was a great success. Students were proud of their role as evaluators of books and as authors of this guide. Students who had had the most "attitude" were practically skipping down the hall to deliver our "book" to the child development center. Nor was this just a feel-good project. Children are a demanding audience—if they get bored, they will get up and walk away. To read out loud effectively, my students had to be able to read affectively. And, to do this, they had to be able to comprehend what they were reading and anticipate what was coming in order to dramatize it— skills they had struggled with in class. To complete this project, they also had to evaluate a book from not only their own, but also their audience's perspective. Ultimately, this project encouraged students to practice their emerging reading skills while doing the one thing universally recommended to help children become life-long readers—read to them.

Besides helping students connect learning to their lives, service-learning positions students to address a central goal of most community colleges: contributing to their (often impoverished) communities. Usually, schools pursue this mission indirectly as a byproduct of their work educating and so "lifting up" the community, one individual at a time. Service-learning allows a community college to more immediately affect its home community both through the service performed by the students and through the lesson taught to the students about the role they, as scholars, can play in enriching their community.

It is because some of my students took this idea of their role as scholars who

can serve their communities seriously that I finished the Avon breast cancer walk with the only walkers lighting up celebratory cigarettes. This group of graduates from my composition courses took over the leadership of our campus Phi Theta Kappa honor society this year. They have revitalized what had been a practically dormant club. They identify themselves as scholars and are justifiably proud of the service initiatives they have put in place this year, including our participation as fundraisers and walkers in Chicago's Avon Breast Cancer Walk.

Designing Service-Learning Writing Projects

For service-learning to work at community colleges, we must respect the realities of our student's lives. They do not have the flexibility of students living on a campus without dependents. Most of our students barely balance school with work and family responsibilities as it is. Many are also struggling to make up for deficits engendered by years of substandard education. This does not mean that our students should be "let off" the service-learning hook anymore than that they should be given a watered-down education. It does mean that we are challenged to be particularly thoughtful in designing service-learning projects.

The best projects are those, like the letters to incoming high school students and the reading to children, which arise from the dual demands of the course objectives and our students' lives. Students in community colleges need service-learning projects that they can do on their own schedules and which are easily accessible by public transportation. They need options so that they can pick the service-learning project that will best work for them. Particularly valuable are projects they can do at home after the kids are in bed (such as writing letters) and, as Shawn Hellman argues, projects they can do at school (writing a persuasive essay for or against a political candidate and then registering voters, or volunteering in the on-campus preschool). When given such options, students have created powerful service-learning projects. For example, after writing a problem-solution paper about her apartment building, one of my students organized a tenant patrol to combat a string of robberies there. Another student wrote the state inspector documenting the negligence and unsafe conditions at a nursing home where she had worked.

Both of these students were in my freshman writing class, English 101. The story of how they came to do these projects demonstrates how service-learning can serve academic goals while also giving students the tools to address problems in their communities. This story began with my desire never again to read another "hot topic" generic problem-solution paper. Instead, I refined the assignment, encouraging students to write on a specific local problem. This refinement meant fewer prepackaged and reheated arguments and more original thought. In "Systems Thinking, Symbiosis, and Service: The Road to Authority

for Basic Writers," Rosemary Arca presents a similar problem-solution assignment in which her basic writers identify a local problem and then propose a volunteer solution.

Despite writing more interesting essays, my students still had a problem constructing strong arguments. In particular, they were not yet skilled at anticipating and addressing the objections of potential readers because they did not have a strong sense of an audience for their arguments. They were writing for me and so their real goal was to write "correctly," not persuasively. Once I realized this, I had the students write their essays as letters, addressed to the person or persons whom they wanted to implement their solution – letters they would mail. The simple act of writing "Dear Mr. Jones"and naming a specific audience heralded a minor miracle. Essays that had been vague and bland became pointed and powerful.

Once I, motivated by my desire to teach persuasive writing, brought this assignment to my writing class, students brought the service to the learning: they wrote to landlords about safety violations, to bosses about unsafe working conditions, to neighbors to rally support for community action, and to city and state regulators documenting problems and arguing for solutions. For many students, this was the first time they had ever written a business letter. In the process of revising these letters, we had extended discussions about tone and style, about when to threaten and when to flatter, and about the value of using letters to document a problem. Using Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and previous student letters as models, we discussed how writing can be used to address problems in students' lives. This assignment has taken the informal discussion I have with students before and after class about the challenges in their lives and has made these challenges the focus of our writing work.

"Keeping it real" also means helping students see the connection between what happens in the classroom and their future careers and life goals. Community college students usually come to college for very practical reasons—to better their life and that of their children by obtaining the education which will allow them to obtain good jobs. The more we as teachers can show them how their academic studies will directly benefit them in obtaining and retaining a job, the more likely they will be to remain committed to their education. As Gerri McNenny has shown, service-learning, can provide an excellent opportunity for career exploration within the academic environment. This exploration is especially important for community college students who frequently have not had access to the informal mentoring of peers (because they are the first in their circle of friends and family to go to college) nor to adequate formal academic and career counseling (because they moved from cash-strapped high schools to

similarly under-budgeted community colleges).

When our advising department was cut, I began giving my composition students assignments designed to help them make concrete academic and career plans. For example, students respond to a compare and contrast assignment by comparing potential majors, transfer schools or careers. Just this week, a student handed in a paper entitled, "Is it worth staying in school?" Struggling with the challenge of balancing school, work, kids, and exhaustion, she was ready to quit. Writing this essay helped her to reaffirm her decision to return to school: "I feel in writing this paper, I answered my own question because seeing my thoughts on paper gave me a better view of the situation." Not only has this student been retained, she has used the writing tools she has learned in the classroom to evaluate her options and make a decision. In addition, since I use student essays as models, these essays serve as a form of informal student mentoring.

Finally, service-learning keeps school relevant by showing students how they can use their developing academic skills to improve their neighborhoods. Some of my students come from relatively stable middle class neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side. However, the majority come from the blighted neighborhoods which have made the South Side synonymous which our worst images of the urban ghetto. My students are very clearheaded about the problems in their communities and they deeply wish these problems could be addressed. Service-learning classes give them the tools to begin this process. These tools include learning how to analyze a problem rather than just to react to it, how to identify possible solutions, how to write an effective letter, how to write in order to persuade others to act for change, and how to identify government and non-profit sources of assistance. At the same time, such classes build within students the expectation that they, as college students in neighborhoods where graduating from high school is a major accomplishment, are the new community leaders. They begin to see themselves as citizen-scholars who can and should work to make change. And this is what empowerment should be about – learning to grasp the power to address and solve local problems.

Service-learning has much to offer community colleges if it is thoughtfully adapted to the needs of our students. My dean's requests for "in-service-learning" and my colleague's definition of it as a field trip to "the other side" show how easily it can be gotten wrong. If service-learning has made it to my little outpost on the academic frontier, it has indeed become commonplace. Let us make sure it does not also become meaningless.

Works Cited

Arca, Rosemary L. "Systems Thinking, Symbiosis, and Service: The Road to Authority for Basic Writers." *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition.* Ed. Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Walters. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Higher Education, 1997. 133-141.

Hellman, Shawn. "Distant Service Learning in First-Year Composition: A Grant Writing Unit." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*. 28.1 (September 2000): 11-20.

McNenny, Gerri. "Helping Undeclared Majors Chart a Course: Integrating Learning Community Models and Service Learning." *Reflections: A Journal of Writing, Service-Learning, and Community Literacy*. 2.2 (Spring 2002): 56-70.

Talley, Kathryn. Olive-Harvey College Coordinator of Institutional Research. "Re: numbers." E-mail to the author. 3/18/02.

Michelle Navarre Cleary is an Assistant Professor of English at Olive-Harvey College, one of the City Colleges of Chicago. To view essays written for a few of the assignments described here, go to the Olive-Harvey English and Speech Department website (http://faculty.ccc.edu/mcleary/mcleary/EnglishandSpeech/EnglishandSpeech/index.htm) and follow the links in the "Announcements" column to the essays written by the students being congratulated and to the South Side Essays. Some of the writing contest winning poems and essays also originated in response to service-learning assignments.