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First Year Composition and Women in Prison Service-based Writing and Community Action

This article discusses a service-learning project for an English Composition class, focusing on the theme of incarcerated women. Through class projects, which included a book drive and research for the group Prison Watch, the students and teacher learned to negotiate the tricky demands of audience and worked to develop a new model of successful service learning.

I currently teach at a Catholic Women's college in suburban New Jersey. My students are mostly from New Jersey, and have come from relatively sheltered backgrounds. About half of the students live on campus, and nearly all are traditional age female undergraduates. But the school's identity as both a women's college and a Catholic college also provides a welcome rationale for incorporating service learning opportunities into the writing classroom. The school was founded by the Sisters of Charity, and our mission and values statement reflects a commitment to "quality teaching as a primary activity [as well as] the development of leadership in a spirit of service and social responsibility for others" ("Mission"). Our religious commitments are enhanced by a feminist mindset prevalent among the faculty that encourages students to think about ways in which they themselves might enact social change in the world that they are about to enter.

Service learning has become a key element in helping composition students learn to see themselves as part of a larger world, understand the need for critical and reciprocal involvement in the community, as well as to negotiate the sometimes tricky demands of audience in a variety of writing forms. According to Robert Coles, this type of critical engagement and reflection, accomplished here through service and writing at a faith-based institution, is consistent with the "very purpose...of colleges and universities," which is to "help one generation after another grow intellectually and morally through self-study and the self-scrutiny such study can sometimes prompt" (48).

In devising a service learning plan for my English Composition course, I tried to find ways that the students could meet the multiple demands of a service-based writing course: both to develop strategies to write in a variety of genres and for a variety of audiences, and to enact reciprocal social change.

Eventually I settled on a theme that might seem somewhat odd for an English Composition course: women in prison. Kathryn Watterson's landmark book, *Women in Prison*, reissued in a revised edition in 1996 with updated information as well as stories told by the women themselves, would serve as the key text, supplemented by Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*.

There was only one "fatal flaw" in my model. Because of security issues, my students would not be going directly into women's prisons, and would not, therefore, be experiencing direct encounters with female prisoners. There would be no opportunities for tutoring, for reciprocal writing exchanges, or even for my students to interview inmates. Yet, good service learning, according to Bruce Herzberg, is dependent on students' abilities to "transcend their own deeply ingrained belief in individualism and meritocracy" (312) and requires a sense of reciprocity, without which, service learning becomes little more than charity. How could I achieve these goals? And how could I avoid what Joe Mertz calls "guerilla service"—short-term projects which are not particularly reciprocal and often serve to reinforce students' views of their own privileged superiority and the belief that helping those less fortunate than themselves for a few hours can make a significant difference? (Mertz and Schroerlucke). My students were going to become aware of a growing problem in their society, namely, women in prison. How could I help my students explore the difficult questions that would surround them, complicating their assumptions, helping them to place what they would be learning in an informed context? And what could we create reciprocity? What could MY students possibly do to help women in prison and at the same time gain a better sense of their own world? These questions and concerns, in many ways, forced me to rethink what a reciprocal and successful service-learning experience might entail.

As I designed the course, two groups helped me to provide students with access to outside audiences, outlets for their work, a sense of reciprocity and a greater understanding of our capacity to meet the needs of incarcerated women. The first was the Women's Prison Book Project,¹ based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Many prisons have no educational class offerings, and few have facilities for a library of any real size. Because many women in prison can only receive books through an organization or a bookstore (rather than an individual), the Women's Prison Book Project fills a need for helping incarcerated women gain access to reading materials. The Book Project staff explained the multiple restrictions on what they can receive (no hardcovers, and no books with watermarked pages, for example) and helped me to think through the ways my class, in partnership with the Women's Book Project, could contribute directly to women in prison by sponsoring a book drive. (See Appendix to this volume for an extensive list of book projects across the country).

The second organization interested in our work was the American Friends

Service Committee of New Jersey, which operates Prison Watch.² Prison Watch, an advocacy group which works for a variety of prison rights, had, until that time, devoted little attention to questions specific to incarcerated women. Research on women in prison was scarce, and the advocate told me that Prison Watch was in desperate need of current and accurate information and analysis. Would my students be willing to write short research papers and donate them to the organization? I was thrilled. I had found a real audience for my students' writing. At last I had a sense that the students' research would not only reach someone else, but that it had the capacity to help inform citizens of the chronic abuse and neglect that most women face in the United States prison system.

Now I was left with only one final problem. How do you convince eighteen-year olds to care about issues regarding women in prison, a topic with which most of them are completely unfamiliar with? How do you convince them that the course will improve their writing skills, help them reach a broader audience, and also benefit women in prison? Most of my students had been raised to believe that people who were in prison were there because they had done something wrong and deserved punishment. They had never been asked to question the roots of those "wrongs" or their own perceptions of them or to examine what "punishment" often means for incarcerated women. As I expected, on the first day of class, a student asked the inevitable question: Why should we care about women in prison? I simply told her that I hoped that by the end of the course, we as a group would have an answer to that question. One student, Katherine, in her reflective essay at the end of the semester, addressed her early hesitations about the project, which were echoed by many of her peers:

When I found out that I would be doing research on women in prison, I wasn't too thrilled about it for a couple of reasons. I figured these women were in prison for a reason; they broke the law and needed to deal with the consequences. I also didn't understand how women in prison could have anything in common with a freshman English composition class. Another reason I didn't understand [was] why these women needed books. I mean, there had to be countless other things that are more important for these women than books.

Sensing hesitations like Katherine's at the beginning of the semester, I asked my students to keep their tough questions in mind and to see if we could find answers together. In order to get them started, I began with a "creative" writing assignment asking students to come up with lists of stereotypes of women in prison, and to write a short paper about what they thought it might be like to be a woman in prison. The next assignment invited/ required students to begin reading Watterson's book and to write responses to their own first papers in light of what they had read. This exercise proved to be invaluable. The initial creative pieces revealed common stereotypes about incarcerated populations, such as "the women have no teeth" and "they are dirty." More complex stereo-

types included ideas about why the women were in prison to begin with, such as “they’ve committed a violent crime and deserve to be there.”

After their reading and discussion, students were able to explore and dispel their own myths and write responses to their first creative essays. It was a fascinating exercise that worked much better than I could have anticipated. Students began to understand that factors such as lack of good nutrition and lack of access to proper health care could cause a woman to lose her teeth. They learned that personal hygiene products are often given out in rationed quantities, leaving the inmates in an impossible situation for keeping clean. And, they learned that women who commit violent crimes are actually a small minority of the incarcerated population. They also learned that women’s violence is often a response to long-standing abuse or is committed in an effort to protect children from an abuser.

Perhaps the most powerful response to this exercise came from Caroline’s final reflective essay at the end of the course. She wrote:

By becoming more educated about women in prison, I was able to dismiss many of my stereotypes that I had which were that women in prison were lazy, ignorant crybabies that created a burden for the US because they chose not to function in society as normal law-abiding citizens, and that prison is the place that will teach them a lesson. I have [since] learned that the US Criminal Justice System chooses to spend billions of dollars to incarcerate women that have been charged with shoplifting and other petty crimes. As I researched rehabilitation, I have realized that prison is not rehabilitation; nor does it even offer much of an opportunity to rehabilitate.

Importantly, Caroline was able to see that, in contrast to her stereotypes, women in prison were often there as a result of economic difficulties, and that the current prison system would do little if anything to help these women to return to society as productive members. Caroline’s sense of a world larger than herself definitely developed throughout the course, and her sense of fairness in the world was challenged and rearranged as she searched for answers to the question of how this could happen in a “democracy.”

Of course, not all of the students achieved Caroline’s level of sophisticated thinking right away, if at all. Throughout the semester I often returned the students to critical reflection in order to help them avoid over-generalizations and the temptation to return to a reliance on their previously held stereotypes. For the most part, though, the research-based assignments and Watterson’s text helped them to work through and critique such stereotypes. More importantly, the idea of having them critique their own stereotypes, rather than having me offer reasons why they might not be accurate, worked in very powerful ways. This fulfilled James Paul Gee’s notion of true “learning,” which he defines as “a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching, though not

necessarily from someone officially designated as a teacher” (539). I don’t think that my pontification on why the students’ stereotypes were “wrong” or “misguided” would have helped them change their minds. Instead their conversations with each other and their engagement with textual evidence allowed them to learn from themselves and one another, and shift their thinking on their own.

While the Women in Prison theme promoted critical transformation, it also provided the context for writing assignments and writing goals that are not always met by the first-year composition class, especially engagement with varied audiences. The book drive itself provided us with some very interesting opportunities to talk about this. In order to advertise the drive, the students decided that they would need two different flyers—one for the faculty and staff on campus, and another for the students. The student flyer, in big letters, read, “Can’t get any buy-back money from the bookstore?” and encouraged students to donate instead. The faculty flyer said, “Need more space in your office?”

The faculty response was tremendous. Bags of books were dropped off mysteriously in front of my office door, students in my class were handed books by other faculty who taught them, and we seemed to have books coming out of our ears. The student response, on the other hand, was disappointing at best. Several students from my class noted this in their final response papers, commenting on how sad they found the apathy of their peers, especially given the importance of the cause. However, their frustration also provided my students with an opportunity for some social advocacy, as they struggled in the dorms and the cafeteria to explain to peers why women in prison should receive books. One of my students noted that “the students did not want to donate any books, and many of them did not even take the time to see what we were doing. They acted as if we were asking them to go into the prisons and deliver the books themselves.” Their research and their knowledge about conditions of women in prison were put to the test as they exercised newfound abilities to participate in critical conversations.

As the course continued, the students also worked on papers in a variety of other genres. While I don’t teach using traditional “modes,” we ultimately covered extrapolation, summary, and analysis, as well as description and exposition. We conducted a letter-writing campaign at the advice of the Women’s Prison Book Project, asking publishers to donate dictionaries. More so than any other demand, the Book Project cannot fill requests for dictionaries fast enough, often forcing a woman to write to them four and five times before the request can be filled. One publisher responded not only by sending dictionaries, but also by agreeing to send “old edition” textbooks to the Book Project in the future. The students were thrilled with both of their efforts to obtain books, and wrote thank you notes to individual publishers and to the faculty on campus.

In the last third of the semester, the class began to work on argument-based

research projects, and students reported that they learned more from this particular assignment than from any of the others I assigned. Students worked to decide on appropriate topics, and wound up with topics that ranged from the elderly in prison, to the death penalty, to pregnancy in prison. In addition to learning a lot about the subject matter, they also learned that writing for a public audience requires more—and different kinds of—effort, and that teamwork can be a very useful tool. More so than I have ever seen before in a composition classroom, they shared resources, swapped drafts, asked each other for editing, citation, and content help, and used scissors and tape with zeal to re-organize drafts. Two students who worked at the library spent one “slow” night photocopying and printing out anything they could find on women in prison that they thought might be helpful to their peers. Many students commented in their final reflective essays on the “connections” that this project engendered between students. Some students outright refused my help during class workshops, stating that they wanted their drafts to be a “surprise” to me.

Overall, their drafts were indeed a surprise to me. They were excellent. Since I had taught many of the students in the course in Basic Writing the previous semester, by the time they handed in their research projects, I was familiar with most of their writing styles. The improvement in this particular assignment was dramatic. In part, I must associate this improvement with the notion of situated cognition—the idea of situating learning in lived contexts, the crux of good service learning (Brown, Collins, Duguid). This Deweyan notion has long helped educators realize that connecting lived experiences to the classroom enhances learning. Early composition theorists were also aware that student writing improves when they have a vested interest in the assignment and its intended audience. Many of the students also commented in their final essays about the quality of these research papers, noting that the public “real world” audience for their work made them want to write better.

Overall, the students felt justifiably pleased and proud of the tangible results of the course. The Women’s Prison Book Project received seven boxes of books from us, for which they sent their thanks. The coordinator of Prison Watch wrote to the class after we sent her the research papers, thanking the students and indicating that she was greatly looking forward to using the information to help strengthen her own presentations.

In retrospect, it was difficult to use a topic as controversial and powerful as women in prison for this type of project. Often, we were so struck as a group by the information that we were uncovering that our conversations strayed far from writing or even critical conversation and simply into shock that the abuses we learned about even took place.

Throughout the course, I continued to struggle to achieve the ambitious service learning goals of reciprocity and social change. Power relationships are

hard to realistically critique when one of the audiences involved in the service project is indeed incarcerated. Can reciprocity be achieved when the key participants in an activity like this never meet? One student complained about this, somewhat fairly, I think, in her final essay, noting that "It was said that a service project should be a mutual commitment, between both parties, but it didn't feel like that. It felt more and more like I was going to a history class on women in prison, rather than just writing about them in an English course." It seemed a leap to identify the process of educating others about the conditions of women in prison as a liberatory exercise or to claim that offering incarcerated women opportunities to read increased the critical thinking levels of my own students. We were not able to meet Thomas Deans' call for a fully integrated service and writing model, one in which students write with a community rather than about or for that community (15).

Ultimately, I believe that some level of reciprocity was achieved, but in an indirect way which wasn't always clearly visible to the students. By helping those who help incarcerated women, we were helping incarcerated women too. Clearly, I think that more direct contact with incarcerated women would have provided the students with a different and perhaps less passive experience than the one they had. However, while the model that I created had its flaws, and while I wish that reciprocity could have been made more visible, I still believe that the project overall was a success.

Bruce Herzberg, Anne Ruggles Gere, Aaron Schultz, and many other service-learning scholars have argued that successful service learning moves students beyond the local and the private and into a larger critical sense of what is at stake in their own worlds. Despite the limitations I encountered with my project, I believe that this aspect of the course was the most successful. Several students commented, much to their own surprise, that they found themselves more invested in women's issues after the course. Overall, I would say that the majority of the students met Barbara Jacoby's admonition that experiential service-learning programs must assist students in reflecting on their connectedness to "historical, sociological, cultural, economic, and political contexts" (7). In addition, the students were able to achieve what Linda Flower calls "negotiated meaning," through which a sophisticated learner creates "a tentative and probably problematic negotiated response to the social and cognitive, historical and material conflicts within the human activity (and activity system) of community outreach" (182). In doing so, a student and her instructor develop a critical consciousness of the contradictions between perceptions or stereotypes and lived reality. While visible reciprocity wasn't always present, Flower's "negotiated meaning" is something that I think all of my students achieved to some degree or another. Some even came to see that changes in the prison system would only occur if people were educated about the problems that currently

exist. Katherine, who had originally commented on her own ignorance about women in prison, underwent such a transformation as she changed her beliefs about the rights that women, in prison and out, should have. At the end of the course she wrote:

My mind was expanding the more I read about such powerful issues and I found myself becoming excited and anxious the more I learned about the prison system of this country. I wanted to race down to capital hill and hold a rally stating all the abuse these women were receiving. I wanted to expose the violating guards and the corrupt judges. I wanted to sue the whole justice system and rewrite a whole new system. Maybe I will someday.

Audre Lorde recognizes that when we view our differences as impossible to overcome or as reasons for not even trying to understand each other's experiences, "we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other" (631). Audre Lorde would applaud Katherine's epiphany.

Notes

1. The Women's Prison Book Project is located c/o Arise Bookstore, 2441 Lyndale Ave. South, Minneapolis, MN 55405. Alternatively, they can be reached at wbp@gurlmail.com.

2. The American Friends Service Committee, Criminal Justice Program, is located at 972 Broad Street, 6th Floor, Newark, NJ 07102. They can also be reached at (973) 643-3079.

See Appendix to this volume for an extensive list of book projects across the country.

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