

Infusing Service-Learning into the Language Arts Curriculum

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"Everyone can be great because everyone can serve."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr

The State of Maryland requires students to complete 75 hours of service-learning in order to graduate from high school. The mandate also requires that preparation, action and reflection be part of that service. I am a ninth grade English teacher at Sherwood High School in Sandy Spring, MD and the school's volunteer coordinator. I believe so strongly in the service-learning requirement that I try to incorporate a service-learning project into each ninth grade unit of study.

Over the past five years, our ninth grade English curriculum has moved away from studying lengthy classics like Homer's *Odyssey* and *Silas Marner* and has instead been organized around the thematic units of "Communication," "Relationships," "Change," "Independence," "Choice" and "Conflict," incorporating multi-cultural literature like *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *Cold Sassy Tree*, *Cry the Beloved Country*, and *The House on Mango Street*. Although many veteran English teachers bemoan the loss of older classics, these curricular changes allow teachers more latitude in choosing thematically coherent texts. Fortunately, they also provide teachers like me valuable opportunities to incorporate service-learning in units of study. Incorporating service-learning has made a dramatic difference in my own teaching of English, and I find that as other states are mandating service, teachers are most curious about units and projects that have worked well for me.

In the first thematic unit of the year, "Independence," students write collaboratively with their parents. Students write a poem or essay of a time in their lives when they felt they had become adults - a time when they experienced their first feelings of independence. As a complement to that assignment, parents, too, write a short poem or essay about a time when they noticed their child was growing into adulthood, exhibiting a desire for independence or becoming a mature individual. The two pieces show the juxtaposition of viewpoints as a parent's recollection of a child's desire for independence is usually quite different from the child's own. Although such an assignment does not conform to most people's definition of "service learning," it creates a community of writers that includes parents and invites parents to become involved in students' work, leading up to when parents are asked to write short reflection statements evaluating their child's service experience and discussing the impact that the child's service had on their family's lives.

Second, parents are asked to write their children letters. These may include a tribute or appreciation for all that the

student has meant to the family, a recollection of an especially poignant moment in their lives together, or words of advice that parents have always wished they had said aloud but never had the chance to express. Some parents include a photo or memento from a particularly happy moment that they've spent together. Then, during the thematic unit on "Relationships," students are asked to write a tribute or letter of appreciation to their parents. The response from parents concerning the writing project is enthusiastic. One mother wrote,

This project enhanced my daughter's appreciation of self and the importance of family... She took a lot of time and care in collecting her thoughts. Please continue this assignment. I can't say enough good things about it. It holds heart-tugging memories, produced good discussion at home, and became a very valuable keepsake.

Another mother wrote, *"This tribute was probably one of the hardest things I've had to do in a long time. Thanks for having us do this. It meant a great deal to me."*

When asked permission to share and possibly publish their works outside the classroom, parents and students are usually enthusiastic. When parents understand school assignments and feel a part of what is happening in the classroom, they become positive voices in the community by lobbying for increased program funding, offering to be guest speakers, helping to write grant proposals, sponsoring class trips, providing resources for enhanced instruction, and reinforcing the importance of continuing the service ethic throughout their children's lives.

Third, to teach the business letter format, I ask students to write to celebrities of their choice and request artifacts that could be donated to the local Children's Hospital for the holiday season. Students are always surprised and pleased when the celebrity sends two mementos-one to keep and the other to donate. Some "stars" who responded this year were hockey player Martin Brodeur, Rosie O'Donnell, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, Dean Kane (Superman), tennis star Martina Hingis, David Copperfield, John Travolta, and cartoonist Jim Toomey. Aaron Bennett of the rock group Reel Big Fish handwrote a note to a student that the student framed and now treasures. The U.S. Olympic Equestrian team sent another student medals, flags, and t-shirts and also wrote a personal response.

Fourth, to teach the format of the friendly letter, I ask my ninth grade students to write a letter of advice to middle

school students that will help them achieve success during their careers in senior high. I am surprised each year at the maturity and wisdom they impart to the younger students. I also ask my students to write letters of appreciation to former teachers who have impacted their lives in some way, and I read them passages from the new book, *Honor a Teacher*, to motivate them. Every November, during National Education Week, letters to students' favorite teachers provide the positive feedback that teachers value but seldom hear. When some teachers answer their students' letters, it's a joyful reconnection and another opportunity to link language arts to relationships and issues that matter.

Fifth, in lieu of a traditional book report, I ask my students to write about a children's book that affected their lives and, if possible, bring a copy that they can donate to poorer communities that need children's books. Students often write of their memories of Dr. Seuss' *Green Eggs and Ham* or reminisce about the first book that Mom or Dad read aloud to them.

Sixth, in an activity that I call the "Walk in Our Shoes Project," ninth graders read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In it, the story's narrator, Scout Finch, recalls her father's edict that "You never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them." From Thanksgiving until the middle of December, students collect used shoes, which are cleaned and labeled for size, to be donated to Goodwill by the school's student volunteers. Before the shoes are delivered, students select a pair and write a story about the person who might have worn them. In their stories, students give names to the donors, tell their life stories, and explain how they came to donate the shoes. Then students perform their stories for the class while wearing the pair of shoes they selected. One particularly moving composition was read by a student wearing combat boots who explained that the boots were worn by his uncle on the last day of his life fighting in Viet Nam. Whether they choose a pair of sandals, tennis shoes, snowshoes, or moccasins, their stories are insightful and imaginative. The project received accolades from the National Education's *NEA Today* magazine, and the local Goodwill store comments that more people read the essays than any other store promotion.

Seventh, the international students in my classes are also given creative service-learning opportunities that support their learning of English. In one such project, students in advanced ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes translated a local hospital's preoperative information booklets and local government documents into Korean, Bengali, Spanish, and Russian. This project was so successful that it is being shared with other hospitals, local government agencies and businesses in the area to meet the needs of our rapidly increasing immigrant population. Students agreed that the time and effort for this project was well spent and are currently translating instructions on obtaining a driver's license, securing a home loan, and registering to vote.

Eighth, as our senior citizen population grows, many of whom are housebound or reside in local nursing homes, we find that our high school students enjoy interviewing and

writing biographies of the elders for their families, especially when so many "baby boomers" live far from their aging parents. Many of our senior citizens also serve as valuable historical resources for the community where we reside. So when the students ask the seniors about their "First Dates," "First Cars," "Years of Schooling," "First Jobs," and "Favorite Songs," they are not only recording the past but sharing it with appreciative family members who, more often than not, have no recorded histories of their family members. For years, we've used Margaret Gulsvig's *First Writes: Forty Writing Exercises for Older Adults* (1987) by Bifokal Productions, Inc., 911 Williamson St., Madison, WI, 53703 (608-251-2818) as our guide.

This project grew out of an earlier variation of intergenerational writing in which students who had written poignant compositions visited nursing homes to read their work. What followed was a miraculous linkage between generations. When one student found it difficult to continue reading her composition aloud, an elderly woman reached out to the teen and said, "Don't worry; we cry a lot here too." This simple offering of compassion opened the door to an outpouring of shared laughter, tears, and memories between the students and the elders. We continued our "intergenerational writing program" with teens writing essays on older people who had influenced their lives and sharing these with some of the people who had inspired them. Later, the students, in turn, assisted the elders in recording fond recollections of young people. These recollections were compiled into memory books and given to the elders. What surprised many of the teens is that after trust had been established, the elders felt comfortable in sharing pieces they had tucked away in their Bibles, family albums and dresser drawers, often speaking of God and church.

Students returned to class to ask why religious issues are seldom discussed in school and why the seniors approached the latter part of their lives feeling comfortable putting religious beliefs on paper but then privately sharing them only with trusted family and friends "like some underground newspaper or secret work of pornography." These questions, in turn, prompted an extended exploration of issues related to the separation of church and state.

Ninth, to foster an interest in reading at an early age, high school students write personal stories for second graders in nearby elementary schools who collaborate with them by drawing pictures to illustrate their stories. The books are then bound and placed in each school's library. High school students claim that the younger pupils learn that reading is important, "even to us bigger kids." In a powerful recognition of the concept of audience, one high school student commented, "We learn not to make the stories too long, to make the plots simple without too many characters and not to underestimate the children because they are insulted if the story is too babyish."

Lastly, for upperclassmen, I recommend writing research papers on topics that lend themselves to service opportunities such as hunger relief; substance abuse; environment and ecology; and poverty, illiteracy, and teen pregnancy. The

more committed and advanced English students become advocates for issues they believe in, so I encourage them to write letters to the editor, to testify at local and state hearings and on Capital Hill, to write opinion pieces and editorials for publication in associations' newsletters, and to schedule and accompany guest speakers to community functions.

I recall one instance when a student and her mother were riding home from school in the family car when a piece of construction debris smashed their windshield. The student took it upon herself to document other instances of flying and dangerous debris. With her data and testimony from other drivers, she wrote the Maryland Department of Transportation and testified at state hearings on the dangers of unkempt construction work sites. Media coverage followed, and the road construction crew "cleaned up its act" before legislation was necessary. This experience was powerful testimony to the power of a cause and effect composition assignment in the language arts program. I also encourage students to submit their pieces to literary magazines and newspapers for publication and to write "How-To" compositions advising others on possible solutions for community problems. In each case, my purpose is to have students read and believe in the motto that hangs in my classroom:

*Great opportunities to help others seldom come,
But small ones surround us every day.*

In each unit I've described, the preparation and reflection components differentiate service-learning from simple community service. Reflection requires students to consider the impact of their service, evaluate their service sites, and recommend special opportunities to others. As much as some students may grumble about writing formal reflection pieces, they find that it helps them solidify their impressions of the service experience as well as write their required college application essays. Another benefit of reflective essays is that they are often welcomed by in-house newsletters, school bulletins and local community newspapers.

Sharing reflections can also promote student activism which, in turn, can enhance students' speaking and writing skills. For example, one of our student's letters to the editor on behalf of refugees was printed in the *Washington Times* newspaper and is still quoted by refugee advocates. Another student is now serving an internship on Capitol Hill because of her testimony on world hunger. And sixteen of our seniors this year wrote an anthology of essays on teen issues such as parenting, discrimination, and sexuality. The book was published with private funding and a grant from the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, AL. The book, *Icarus Rising*, was featured in the *Washington Post* ("Style Section," C4, 3/9/00) and is now in its second printing. American University in Washington, D.C. has asked the book's authors to speak at freshman orientation.

Perhaps the best example of the power of reflective writing comes from a senior this year who gives seminars to middle school students and college ESOL students on writing skills he has developed during his high school career. He writes:

By teaching others the craft of writing, I have gained much. Sharing the knowledge and skills I have validates why I spent so many devoted years learning to write well and also inspires me to continue my education. I have attained a better sense of what it must be like to be a teacher and now have a better respect for the individuals who choose to dedicate their lives to the education of others.... Maya Angelou has said, 'When you know better, you do better,' and that is my greatest hope-that when I invest the time to educate individuals, they will embrace the skills and knowledge they acquire and learn not only to do more but to be more.

The Author

*Kathy Megyeri has taught high school English for 34 years and also serves as her school's volunteer coordinator, ensuring that all 1800 students complete their required service hours. She has written extensively on the subject of service and language arts for **English Journal** and the **NSEE Quarterly**. She taught in the Ukraine as the winner of the **USIA's Excellence in Teacher Awards** and won a summer Fulbright to Malaysia and Singapore. She has contributed chapters to Esther Wright's **Why I Teach: Inspirational True Stories from Teachers Who Make a Difference** and to **Reflection Activities: Helping Students Connect With Texts**, forthcoming from NCTE.*

According to Kathy Megyeri, a side benefit of service learning is the tangible rewards given to students and to the projects in which they participate. She reports, "One of our students won a total of \$6000 last year to be used any way she wished, and she is still lobbying her parents to spend the money on establishing a local teen runaway shelter. If students have served the elderly, they learn that senior citizens' publications pay very well for their pieces. In fact, one student was mailed a \$350 check from the American Association of Retired Persons' *Modern Maturity* magazine. The Hitachi Foundation gives generous awards for outstanding contributions to service-learning, as does the J.C. Penney Company and the Prudential Insurance Company. The state of Maryland recognizes outstanding teen service-learning with a trophy in the spring of each year. The Chamber of Commerce, Soroptimists, our Maryland Governor, and our county government all award cash prizes and citations for Maryland's "Most Beautiful People." Some of my own instructional units and activities have won me grants and awards which allow me to purchase materials and award prizes to my students at the end of the year. I've also found that groups like the Kiwanis, Optimists, Lions' Clubs and other community philanthropic organizations enjoy hearing stories about local high school students' contributions and accomplishments. In most cases, after students speak at a monthly luncheon meeting, the group is supportive in donating money and manpower for projects that may involve their membership."