

Community-Based Writing Instruction and the First-Year Experience¹

Mary Vermillion

This essay describes a series of assignments that I have used in Writing and Social Issues, a first-year writing course that features service-learning. These assignments should prove useful to those interested in the relationship between community-based writing instruction and first-year courses that focus on the student's transition from high school to college.

First, some information about my institution and its first-year courses. Mount Mercy College (Cedar Rapids, Iowa) is a four-year Catholic liberal arts college with an enrollment of about 1,300 full- and part-time students. Founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1928, the College is distinguished by “a spirit of committed service wherever human need exists” (*MMC Catalog* 2). At Mount Mercy, each first-year student must enroll in a course that is part of our Partnership Program. Partnership classes are capped at fifteen and limited to first-year students. Each of these courses features academic content typical of introductory college courses (Composition, Introduction to Psychology, Western Civilization), but at the same time, all of the courses have a common goal: to help students make a successful transition to the college classroom. To that end, the courses share some objectives and teaching strategies. For instance, each course is highly interactive so that students gain the ability to teach themselves and each other: they become “partners” with their professors and classmates as they seek knowledge, explore ideas, and refine skills. The Partnership Program also emphasizes academic skills such as revising; formulating meaningful questions; and distinguishing between facts, opinions, and judgements.

As with many first-year courses, Mount Mercy's Partnership courses also seek to “promote retention as a byproduct” of accomplishing several goals—some academic and some affective (Gardner). These affective goals are to help first-year students

- make friends
- build support groups or a sense of community
- improve their attitude towards faculty and the teaching-learning process
- work effectively with a mentor
- feel important and significant to the college and larger community
- feel enthusiasm for the college
- get involved in life at the college outside the classroom.

Research suggests that involved students perform better academically (*First-Year Experience*). Affective goals impact academic goals. For these reasons, I kept my affective goals firmly in mind when I designed the writing assignments for Writing and Social Issues.

The assignments consist of five formal papers and several informal exercises. Each formal paper is workshopped in peer revision groups—once for content and organization, and once for clarity, correctness, and conciseness. All assignments, formal and informal, focus on social justice issues or on what it means to help or serve others effectively.

During the first day of class (see Syllabus, pages 8-9, for complete course plan), I give students thirty minutes to write an essay describing a time when they helped someone. Then students pair up, introduce themselves, read each others' essays, and respond in writing to the following questions:

- What was the writer's attitude toward the person he/she described? How could you tell?
- What bit of description (a sentence or longer) seemed most effective to you? What, specifically, made it effective?

When we reconvene as a large group, the students introduce their writing partners and share the passage that they liked best in their partner's essay. Students thus begin to build community and to pinpoint the qualities that make writing good.

This first-day exercise also meets several other goals, which I explicitly state at the end of the assignment sheet I give the students:

- to familiarize me (the teacher) with your writing ability
- to familiarize you with peer readers
- to prepare you for longer, more in-depth writing workshops
- to help you get to know at least one other person in the class.

I do not state my goals on every assignment, but I believe that it is important to do so early in a first-year course because too many students seem content uncritically to do what they are told. I want them to leave this passivity behind; I want them to understand that they have every right to know why a teacher asks them to do something.

This exercise also paves the way for the first formal essay in which students narrate a significant time when someone helped them or when they became aware of a social injustice. Most students choose to write about being helped—possibly because the assignment gives them a chance to look back on the life they “left behind” in order to come to college. Perhaps for the same reason, those few students who do choose to write about a social injustice often focus on something unfair that happened to them rather than on a pattern or a structure of inequality that they witnessed and recognized. However, there is the rare student who beautifully blends narrative and analysis as she discusses the treatment that Bosnian immigrants receive in her hometown.

I meet with the students individually to discuss their rough drafts and to help them identify two elements of their writing that they would especially like to improve during the semester. I ask how college is going and make referrals if necessary. This conference seems to encourage students to use my office hours, an unfamiliar concept to most first-year students. Most seek help with papers, but a few want to discuss other issues: choosing a major, dealing with a roommate, finding the meaning of life.

Students begin work on their second and fourth papers by attending our college’s Volunteer Fair. For their second paper, they conduct an interview with someone in the Cedar Rapids area who has a lot of experience helping others. The Volunteer Fair is an excellent place for students to find someone willing to be interviewed. At the very least, they meet people who can give them names of other potential interviewees. Many students want to interview a volunteer in their hometown, but I insist that they interview someone in Cedar Rapids because one goal of this assignment is for students to gain familiarity with the city. For the same reason, I also require students to conduct their interviews on-site. Students who are from Cedar Rapids are empowered by guiding their friends who are not. Students with cars help those without, and bonds between classmates are strengthened. Many times the interviewees become mentors to the students—particularly if the interviewee is an upperclassman at Mount Mercy. Some students have been offered internships and summer jobs as a result of their interviews.

The interview paper takes the form of a feature article for our college newspaper. I give students these guidelines:

- Excite your readers about volunteering and about social justice issues.
- Inform them about your interviewee and about the agency/organization he/she works for.
- Provide stories about how the interviewee got interested in his/her work, or create a scene that depicts the interviewee’s experience with helping others.
- Include quotations that capture your interviewee’s personality and work

I also give the students a model interview and lots of guidance about setting up and preparing for their own interviews. As a class, we generate a list of general questions that they will all most likely want to ask their interviewees (for example, Why did you start volunteering with Organization X?). I tell them that they should also generate more specific questions by doing some research before their interview. After students workshop drafts of their classmates’ interviews, I ask them to write about what they have learned from these drafts. This exercise enhances the students’ sense of audience, and it broadens their knowledge of area service organizations. It also teaches students that they can learn from one another.

This interview paper, along with the Volunteer Fair, helps students prepare for their fourth paper, a narrative about their experience as a volunteer in the Cedar Rapids area. At the Fair, students find at least three organizations with which they would like to volunteer. If an institution does not have a volunteer fair (or even if it does), teachers can prepare students for this assignment (and for their interviews) by assigning each student a different service organization to research. Students will thus learn research skills with a sense peers would be counting on them for information.

I advise my students to volunteer with organizations that will allow them to work directly with people and that do not have lengthy training periods or reference checks. Students must average an hour a week, with a total of at least six hours before the first draft of their fourth paper is due.

I supplement this fourth paper assignment with informal assignments, readings, and the third formal paper. Before students begin volunteering, they write in response to the following questions:

- Why does the organization interest you?
- What do you hope to experience and learn as a volunteer?
- What are your concerns or anxieties about volunteering?

Students also keep a log and reflection notebook about their volunteer experience. They begin this notebook with a reflection on part of the College’s mission statement:

Within the context of a Christian community, Mount Mercy

- [...] creates an awareness of ethical issues and commitment to responsible social action for justice.
- promotes responsible behavior toward all living things and the environment.
- prepares students for responsible citizenship and service in society (*MMC Catalog 2*)

Throughout the semester, I assign other readings that pertain to social justice issues or that focus on helping. These texts encourage students to see that we must often do more than “help” or volunteer. We must also educate ourselves about the causes of injustice, and we must work to change them. The last time I taught the course, my three main texts were Rebecca Brown’s *Gifts of the Body* (a short story collection about a homecare worker for people with AIDS), Alex Kotlowitz’s *There Are No Children Here* (a best-seller about two African-American boys growing up in inner-city Chicago), and David Haynes’ *Right By My Side* (a coming-of-age novel about a middle-class African-American boy who is abandoned by his mother). Kotlowitz and Haynes both visited our campus (in fact, all students in the Partnership Program read Kotlowitz), so I required students to attend the authors’ question-and-answer sessions or readings and to write responses to these events. Our discussion of all three texts usually centered on student-authored discussion questions.

For their third paper, students write an analytical essay about one of these texts. I encourage them to explore what the text teaches them about helping others or about confronting injustice. Students write this essay while they are completing their volunteer hours for their fourth paper. The two tasks complement one another well and students for their fifth and final paper, a persuasive research essay about a social issue of the student’s choice.

I suggest that students write this final essay in response to a question or concern that emerges as they volunteer. I also suggest that they do some primary research while volunteering. Most students still rely heavily on “traditional” library or internet research, but many conduct at least one interview as part of their research. Many students also choose to write about social justice issues relevant to their chosen field of study. For instance, social work majors often write about child abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse, or poverty. Nursing majors write about the need for health care reform. Education majors address bilingualism.

During the final weeks of the semester, I focus half of each class session on strategies for producing an effective research paper and the other half on creating a class anthology. This class anthology gives students a better understanding of the publishing process—both from a writer’s and from an editor’s perspective. Every student revises the essay that he or she wants to include in the anthology and writes a brief bio to accompany it. I put two sets of the essays on reserve in the library and ask each student to create a Table of Contents. As a group, we discuss their rationales, and we determine a final Table of Contents and a title. Then the students divide into groups. One designs the cover, one writes the introduction, one proofreads the essays, and one handles publicity for the reading and reception we have at the end of the semester.

At the reception, we take donations on behalf of a service organization selected by the class. Each student receives a copy of our anthology, and the students read excerpts of their essays to their classmates, their friends, their RA’s, their teachers—sometimes to their parents or to the Dean. After a semester of building a community that is just, caring, purposeful, and disciplined (Boyer), we enjoy a community that is celebratory.

Notes

1 First-Year Experience is a registered trademark of The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina. I base much of my information about First-Year courses on *The First-Year Experience: First-Year Experience Resource Seminar on Student Success and Retention*, Conference on The First-Year Experience, Des Moines, Iowa, June 25, 1998.

2 I borrow these elements of campus community from Ernest L. Boyer, “Campus Life: In Search of Community” (Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990) in *The First-Year Experience* 9.

Works Cited

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- The First-Year Experience: First-Year Experience Resource Seminar on Student Success and Retention*. The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina. Conf. Des Moines, Iowa, 25 June, 1998.
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The Author

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EN 026 WRITING AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Mary Vermillion

TEXTS:

The Longman Handbook for Writers and Readers, Chris M. Anson and Robert A. Schwegler

The Gifts of the Body, Rebecca Brown

There Are No Children Here, Alex Kotlowitz

Right By My Side, David Haynes

GOALS AND COURSE STRUCTURE:

The primary goal of this course is for you to develop greater expertise and confidence as a writer. The best way to improve your writing is by writing. Or more specifically, the best way to improve your writing is by practicing the three parts of the writing process: invention, drafting, and revision. For this reason most of our class sessions will involve some type of writing activity. Many of these activities will involve writers' groups. In your group, you will get feedback on your own writing, gain a sense of audience, work collaboratively on projects, see how other students handle writing assignments, and help one another revise.

This course is also designed to help you examine and actively fight some of the injustices in our world. Most of our readings—and most of your writing assignments—will focus on social issues (such as poverty and AIDS) or on what it means to help others. In your first major essay, you will narrate a significant time when someone helped you or when you became aware of a social injustice. In your next essay, you'll analyze what David Haynes's novel teaches you about helping others or confronting injustice. (Haynes is one of two visiting writers we'll meet with this semester!) For your third essay, you'll interview someone with lots of experience helping others, working or volunteering in the Cedar Rapids area. Throughout the semester, you'll do some volunteering of your own, and in your fourth essay, you'll write a narrative about your new volunteer experiences. Finally, you'll write a persuasive essay about a social issue of your choice.

I see this class very much as a group enterprise, and I look forward to each of you shaping our discussions with your questions and ideas. Our responses to each other and our efforts to acknowledge and build upon each other's ideas will nurture a community of respect and learning. Your contribution to this community depends upon your good attendance, thoughtful reading of the texts, timely completion of writing assignments, and class participation. Because your daily efforts in listening, reading, writing, and speaking are important to the rest of our group, if you miss more than two classes you may lower your final grade. If you do miss a class, YOU are responsible for finding out what you missed and for making up the work.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING:

You will produce five major essays (described above) and a series of smaller writings and exercises. The five major essays will each be approximately 5 pages, typed, and double-spaced. I will give you detailed instructions for each essay at least one week before its first draft is due.

If you look at the schedule on the following pages, you will see that I usually ask you to turn in three drafts per essay. On the day the first draft is due, you and your writing group will focus on revising the content and organization of each other's drafts. On the day the second draft is due, your group will edit each other's drafts for style and correctness. It is crucial that you have your draft complete for each revision day. A complete draft on the first revision day is one that you have made as good as you can on your own. Nothing should be missing that you plan to include: introduction, conclusion, supporting details. A complete draft on the second day is one in which you have already incorporated your group's suggestions from the first day. It is a draft that you have revised for content and organization. If you do not have your drafts ready, or if you miss class on revision days, you hinder your group's work. For this reason, you will lower your essay grade one letter for each revision day that you miss or are unprepared for. The 1st personal essay will account for 10% of your grade. Each of the other four papers, other writings combined, and class participation will each be weighted 15%.

SCHEDULE

- 9/1 Introductions and in-class writing activity
- 9/3 Handbook: Ch 1 “On Being a Writer and Reader,” Ch 4 “Planning”
“Defining Your Purpose” (44-48), Kotlowitz (1-76)
- 9/8 Handbook: Ch 7 “Drafting,” Brown (3-10), Kotlowitz (77-189)
- 9/10 Kotlowitz (193-end)
- 9/15 Meet with Alex Kotlowitz during class time and at 7 p.m.
- 9/16 Attend the Volunteer Fair, Heritage Hall, 3:30-7 p.m.
- 9/17 Handbook: Ch 8 “Revising”
FIRST PERSONAL ESSAY DRAFT 1 DUE
- 9/22 NO CLASS—I will meet with you individually to discuss a draft of your personal essay.
- 9/24 Handbook: Ch 13 “The Editing and Proofreading Process,” “Focusing Paragraphs” (94-102)
Haynes (Chs 1-2)
FIRST PERSONAL ESSAY DRAFT 2 DUE
- 9/29 Handbook: “Informative Writing” (827-40), Haynes (Chs 3-7)
FIRST PERSONAL ESSAY FINAL DRAFT DUE
- 10/1 Handbook: “Creating Coherence in Paragraphs” (102-08), Haynes (Chs 8-13)
- 10/6 Handbook: Ch 10 “Paragraphs: Developing Ideas”
INTERVIEW DRAFT 1 DUE
- 10/8 Handbook: “Defining a Thesis” (51-55), Haynes (Chs 14-end)
INTERVIEW DRAFT 2 DUE
- 10/11 Attend writer David Haynes’ Q&A session (3:30) or reading (7:30)
- 10/13 Handbook: Ch 51 “Writing About Literature”
INTERVIEW FINAL DRAFT DUE
- 10/15 ANALYTICAL ESSAY DRAFT 1 DUE
- 10/27 Handbook: “Linking Paragraphs” (108-11), Ch 29 “Wordiness”
ANALYTICAL ESSAY DRAFT 2 DUE
- 10/29 Handbook: Ch 21 “Pronouns,” Brown (13-33)
ANALYTICAL ESSAY FINAL DRAFT DUE
- 11/3 Handbook: “Writing Argumentative Papers” (757-79)
“The Position Paper” (789-93), Brown (37-67)
- 11/5 Handbook: Ch 43 “What is Research?”
“Locating Sources” (578-608), Brown (71-98)
- 11/10 SECOND PERSONAL ESSAY DRAFT 1 DUE
- 11/12 Handbook: “Taking Notes” 608-18, Brown (101-27)
SECOND PERSONAL ESSAY FINAL DRAFT DUE
- 11/17 Handbook: “Critical Thinking” (780-93), Brown (131-48)
PERSUASIVE RESEARCH ESSAY WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY AND NOTES ON FIVE SOURCES DUE
- 11/19 Brown (151-end)
PERSUASIVE RESEARCH ESSAY OUTLINE AND INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH DUE
- 12/1 Work on class anthology
- 12/3 Work on class anthology
PERSUASIVE RESEARCH ESSAY COMPLETE DRAFT DUE
- 12/8 NO CLASS—I will meet with you individually to discuss your persuasive essay.
- 12/10 Public reception (complete with refreshments) to celebrate the completion of our anthology and our semester
PERSUASIVE RESEARCH ESSAY FINAL DRAFT DUE