

B. Cole Bennett

## *The Best of Intentions: Service-Learning and Noblesse Oblige at a Christian College*

*This article investigates the successes and failures of an upper-level service-learning composition course on the theme of “literacies” in order to uncover the particular challenges of engaging in community-based critical teaching in a faith-based institution. It identifies a religiously grounded form of noblesse oblige revealed in students’ literacy autobiographies and proposes pedagogical interventions to engage students in considering their own and their institutions’ ideological assumptions about literacy and service.*

During a time of explosive growth, when compositionists are embracing service-learning methodologies that motivate students, provide valuable service to others, build needed connections between universities and their communities, and give students real reasons for writing, it is crucial that we continue to critically monitor our progress, investigating our failures while we rejoice in our successes. In this essay, I focus on pertinent successes and failures I experienced while teaching an upper-level writing course at a faith-based college and their implications for the ongoing critical conversation about service-learning in composition.

### **The Course: Exploring Literacies**

During the Spring of 1999, I taught an upper-level expository writing course based on the theme of “literacies” at William Carey College (WCC), a small Baptist college in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The syllabus, a combination of ideas I had appropriated from other service-oriented literacy courses, was very busy but manageable. Each student was assigned to read Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary* as well as a number of articles on literacy (many taken from the Norton anthology *Literacies*), ranging from anecdotal accounts of reading and writing experiences to various cultural treatments of text. Students’ written responses and class presentations facilitated whole-class discussions of this material. Simultaneously, the students were required to tutor elementary school children ninety minutes per week in a national community-based volunteer program called HOSTS,

an acronym for “Help One Student to Succeed,” which concentrates on the improvement of reading and writing skills. Using excerpts and examples from Emerson, Fretz and Shaw’s *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, I introduced the concept of qualitative observation, and each week, the William Carey students submitted two pages of field notes, giving detailed accounts of their tutoring sessions, conversations and observations of the children. At the end of the trimester, students produced an extended literacy autobiography that synthesized their own memories of learning, analyses of readings, reflections on their community service, and their newly informed ideas of “literacies.”

On the first day of class, I assigned the first chapter of Jonathan Kozol’s *Illiterate America*, a three-page rendering of a working professional who hides his inability to read and lives in constant fear of exposure—Kozol’s “warm-up” to a familiar “literacy crisis” argument. On the second day of class, after my students had read and responded to this piece, I asked them to compose their own definitions of the word “literacy” and then list the characteristics of “literate people” and “illiterate people,” which I wrote on the board. This was, quite obviously, a complete set-up. With little variation, students adhered to stereotypical descriptions of these terms, describing literate people as, for example, “cultured,” “clean,” “motivated,” and “hardworking” and illiterates as “poor,” “simple,” “unfortunate,” and “lazy.”

Throughout the course, we plowed through many readings—both abstract theoretical pieces

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on literacy theory (Gee, Brodkey, Scribner) and narrative accounts with implied theses (Baldwin, Heath, Kozol)—to carefully examine what is meant by “literacy” in various settings, cultures and micro-contexts. That there is more than one kind of literacy was one of the main themes the class addressed. Students’ final papers reflected a new sense of the word “literacy,” as students were able to retrace one of their own literacies through people, events and places in their past and to place this journey within the context of their tutoring experiences and course readings.

Among my goals for the course was to provoke my students to critically question the cultural forces that operate on the elementary school system, the HOSTS tutoring program in particular, and their own views of education. This explicit goal, supported by the readings I selected and the types of foci around which my students’ reflective activities centered, aligns my teaching philosophy here with what Tom Deans would call “the key of Freire.” Given this Freirean framework, I present below what I perceive to be the specific successes and failures of this service-learning course. Particularly striking was the number of students who relied almost exclusively on religious evangelical doctrines to explain their work and attitudes. That is, many used common religious metaphors in their reflections and field journals, wrote of their community tutelage in terms of Christian service, and gravitated toward rather one-dimensional explanations of their own literacy experiences. I also offer some examples of attitudes I identified that demonstrate an as-yet underdeveloped concept of noblesse oblige, one wherein a “server” feels more privileged than the “served” not by dint of material possessions or class membership, but by an assumption of religious status. I conclude with pedagogical suggestions that may be helpful for those who teach at institutions with evangelical mission statements—especially those institutions whose ideologies permeate the curriculum at every level.

### **Service-Learning Successes**

#### ***Students gained richer definitions of “literacy.”***

By the end of the course, students commanded a much broader concept of this term. The articles, books and class discussions prompted them to reconceptualize literacy as an ability to make sense of one’s world through many different means and manipulations of various symbol systems. Students added terms such as “cultural

literacy” and “social literacy” to their vocabularies and began to conceptualize the reading difficulties of the children they tutored in ways other than as a result of cognitive deficiencies.

#### ***Students began to critically evaluate educational apparatuses from an informed position.***

Having witnessed firsthand the labeling of children in the HOSTS program where they tutored, students began to understand more fully the “politics of remediation” Rose discusses in *Lives on the Boundary*. They often queried the placement and retention of children in the remedial program and became critical of what they believed were ill-conceived “mastery tests” and faulty diagnostic measures. Moreover, the college students made astute observations regarding the children’s abilities to understand their own situation. For example, each HOSTS tutor is required to document the children’s progress for each session; several of the children were either curious or visibly agitated about what the tutors were writing about them. Despite the program administrators’ insistence that the children perceived HOSTS as a “gifted” program, the WCC students noted that the children knew what the coded stickers that represented grade levels meant and were able to calculate how many levels “behind” they were. Furthermore, several students directly asked their tutees why they thought they were in the program, and the children responded with comments such as, “Because I don’t read very well” or “Because I need help with my reading.”

#### ***Children received reading assistance and HOSTS received tutor feedback.***

Regardless of the effectiveness of my composition pedagogy with the college students, many children received valuable intensive reading education. The letters students wrote, evaluating the program and suggesting changes, helped both themselves and the administrators more accurately gauge that value and provided qualitative response to complement the quantitative measures on which the program generally relied.

#### ***Students wrote ambitious papers making meaningful connections between their own lives and their newfound understandings of “literacy.”***

Students gained experience with all stages of the writing process, synthesizing pertinent information for a final project from almost fifty pages of fieldnotes, reader responses and article summa-

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ries and analyses. They workshopped drafts of their final papers and turned in revised copies of these papers, along with a separate feedback letter to the HOSTS administrators. Compared to most papers written in my other composition classes, these papers were among the most diligently written, and students commented that their interest in the course and the assignment propelled them to produce their best writing.

***Relations between William Carey College and the community were improved and philanthropic attitudes were nurtured.***

The HOSTS program appreciated the steadfast presence of college students in its tutoring sessions. Their comments evinced an appreciation of the course design and of the students' efforts. William Carey College is often considered an isolated and self-absorbed institution, and this involvement helped mitigate such perceptions in the community. Students also reported that they appreciated the opportunity to volunteer in the community, and many expressed the commitment to (and indeed did) continue tutoring after the trimester ended.

In addition, my colleagues became interested in what I was doing, and my students seemed to enjoy participating in a class that was different from others in the curriculum. Such positive outcomes help bolster the argument for service-learning in a writing classroom at a faith-based college. I turn now to the less successful aspects of the class.

**Service-Learning Failures**

***Students' critical reflection was limited.***

As my students turned in responses to articles included in *Literacies*, I noticed that they rarely made sophisticated connections among the articles. Despite the support for synthesis that the anthology provides, students only occasionally pointed out these connections in class discussions or written responses, often simply commenting on one aspect of an article. What's more, though we had several discussions regarding students' changing definitions of literacy, they rarely seemed spontaneously to make associations between its abstractions, their tutoring sessions, and their readings.

But the most obvious manifestations of stalled critical thinking appeared in the literacy autobiographies students turned in at the end of the semester. The assignment asked them to relate their own memories of learning, the read-

ings, their community service, and the concepts they had encountered in class. What I received, though valuable in many ways, technically well crafted and prepared with care, were mostly patchwork accounts of various school-related anecdotes tied to vague summaries of selected class readings with simplified "what I learned" paragraphs. Let me be clear: some papers did go into more depth than others, and virtually all my students became very engaged in writing them. Few, however, interrogated published writers' experiences and ideas the way the assignment prompt had asked. After examining the students' papers and field notes as artifacts, I believe one of the prime factors inhibiting their critical thinking was their disproportionate reliance on a rubric of fundamental Christianity for understanding, interpreting, and judging their readings and life experiences.

As an example, I wish to draw attention to one of the better developed final papers submitted by Anna, a junior English major whose father is a Baptist preacher. In her literacy autobiography, she reflected on her seemingly perfect education to see if she could detect what made it appear perfect, and to see if it was perfect indeed. She systematically and smartly engaged and criticized various aspects of literacy in her past, analyzing school literacy, reading and writing literacy, literacy of family relations, cultural literacy, literacy of the arts, and spiritual literacy. When all these literacies seemed to fail a larger purpose in her life, she turned inward (and upward) to find a passion to which to apply her abilities. She wrote:

*I began praying for God to show me His plan for my life. The first thing He showed me was that although I enjoyed many things, I never had an undying passion for anything. God began to remind me of the few things I had been interested in pursuing. My interest in these things was never stable, but in one area my interest and enthusiasm never wavered—English. Now I see that God does not want me to be a pastor, but he is combining my two passions in life and is going to use me as an English teacher on the foreign mission field.*

She concluded that such desire for passion was also instilled by her "teachers"—thus, her education was, in the final analysis, perfect.

Anna's paper is striking in that she arrives at this epiphany by carefully interrogating each

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area of literacy she first describes except spiritual literacy. This part of her education remains unchecked; she regards it at face value as an asset and finds it useful as a heuristic to examine her other literacies. Anna quotes numerous Biblical scriptures and a prayer she offered at her life-changing turning point to help the reader understand the motivation and logic for her choices. I do not offer this example to derogate her religious conviction, but to show that such conviction suffices in her mind as the lone critical construct sufficient to examine her entire life of literacies; either her ability or her desire to investigate further stops here.

Another student, SuAnne, who became very interested in sections of Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, wrote a comprehensive account of her schooling, pointing out those teachers who had allowed her to express herself with writing along with teachers who were overly concerned with surface issues of grammar and punctuation. She ended her paper by discussing the start of her college career, highlighting our class and our multi-layered definitions of literacy. "The biggest lesson I learned," she states, after a well-written investigative account of her school years, "is that I should not judge other people because of their abilities as writers or readers [because] God made the world with all different types of people." Once again, I applaud this attitude of acceptance, but I am astounded that her summation of an otherwise rich critical reflection of various literacies casts her enlightenment and her new attitudes toward people's differing literacies as simple recognition of God's making different types of people, rather than, say, as a response to one of the dozens of other ideas she encountered in readings and discussions throughout the trimester.

One interpretation of these comments is that students' notions of service were confined to versions of "charity," resisting more "socially conscious" or "advocatory" stances. However, as Keith Morton argues in "The Irony of Service," a "service paradigm of charity" can be valid, fruitful and inherently valuable if pursued with integrity and authenticity to ends of "justice" (31). Instead, I believe a better explanation is found in a unique incarnation of what Andrea Fishman writes about in "A Lesson from the Amish," one of the first articles that my students are assigned to read from the *Literacies* textbook. Fishman's point is that the Amish people she studied, while highly literate in certain ways

of family, church, and community, did not value ways of inquiry that might cause them to question their faith; critical thinking skills that are possibly subversive to their religion and traditional way of life lie undeveloped.

***College students had difficulty considering themselves agents of social change.***

After each tutoring session, students wrote two pages of field notes. Many comments in these field notes addressed the remarkable reading and writing abilities of the students who were coming to receive tutoring assistance. Since much of what we read during the course dealt with tracking and labeling in schools, I would bring these field notes into our class discussions, prodding my students to question students' identification as "remedial." In the margins I would ask, "If they can read, write, and comprehend so well, why are they taken from their regular curriculum and placed in HOSTS? Do you agree with the HOSTS administrators who say that the children believe they are in a gifted program?" Even though the answers were obvious and my students understood the implications of the questions, none actually took the initiative to address these issues head-on as they tutored. I heard comments such as, "Well, who am I to question their program?" or "I am not an educator."

At the end of the course, I required students to write a feedback letter to the HOSTS administrators to give both positive feedback and suggestions for improvement. These letters were overwhelmingly positive. The suggestions my students did give centered on micro issues such as the improvement of certain exercises or scheduling concerns. A few did address the disparity between their students' ability and HOSTS diagnoses of their ability, suggesting a reconsideration of the diagnostic tests, but even those letters were overcompensated with gushing praise and tag lines like Linda's, "I know that I am not a licensed teacher so feel free to discard any information that seems biased or unworthy of regard or attention." These college students simply did not see themselves as I had hoped they would—as informed writers, expert readers and participatory citizens whose opinions could be of great value to a program largely staffed by community volunteers.

***HOSTS Director did not value server feedback.***

Not only were students' comments generally tentative, but the suggestions they offered concern-



ing changes to learning materials and the improvement of mentor-student relationships were virtually ignored by the director of the program. For example, when she and I talked about my students' feedback, she began to laud the regimentation and proven track record of HOSTS' tutoring materials, diagnostic tests, etc., and made what I interpreted to be token gestures toward reconsidering some of the children's files. Moreover, she told me explicitly that, because she did not like confrontation, she felt uncomfortable following up on my students' suggestions that she address frequent sour attitudes and other problems on the part of two full-time staff tutors.

I was disappointed to see that the HOSTS director was so quick to dismiss the suggestions that my students had offered. Connections between the educational institution and the community service-learning site are crucial, and the connection here, though an integral part of my course design, was clearly weak.

***A special form of noblesse oblige emerged.***

Recognizing and overcoming noblesse oblige—the obligation assumed by those in “privileged” positions to behave nobly toward those judged less fortunate—should be an ongoing concern for teachers and administrators of service-learning programs. Scholars in composition are beginning to take this task seriously, as evinced, for example, by the frequent citation of Bruce Herzberg's “Community Service and Critical Teaching,” by articles like Keith Morton's “The Irony of Service” and Betty Smith Franklin's essay in this issue of *Reflections*, and by Ellen Cushman's recent work. In her succinct articulation of the problem, Cushman states that students involved in service-learning classes often view community members as “passive victims who have created their own fates.” To address these concerns she proposes various forms of activist learning methodology, such as invited intervention, self-reflection, and mutual knowledge making.

I believe we should continue to plumb the concept of noblesse oblige in order to discover its multiple, often subtle variations that obtain in diverse settings, on order to arrive at additional solutions to overcome it. I found a particularly striking manifestation of noblesse oblige emerging from my class at William Carey College, a school whose institutional philosophy includes an overt mission of evangelism

and where discussions of and applications to Christianity are incorporated into virtually every part of the academic and social curriculum. While service-learning seemed to be a particularly interesting concept to the administration and my colleagues at WCC thanks to the parallel commitments to “service” undergirding both the college and the pedagogy, I believe such intersections of ideology are ripe ground for critical examination, lest the implications of their dissonances go unnoticed.

Noblesse oblige is one of the most visible areas of this dissonance. In addition to, and actually to a greater degree than, the normal attitudes of obligation due to privileged positions of class, financial status and education, I witnessed the emergence of what I call the “obligation of the evangelical Christian”—the obligation to serve stemming from one's position as a New Testament Christian who interprets one's mission as serving others to demonstrate God's love and to win souls. At times, such an obligation breeds a skewed relationship between the one serving, who possesses “the ultimate love” to give, and the one served, who necessarily craves it and, by extension, needs it for salvation of the soul.

Consider this excerpt from Brandy, a young woman whose first paragraph of the final paper reads as follows:

*What could be sweeter than an innocent child looking up into the eyes of an adult mentor? These are eyes searching for someone who will love them, listen to them, and help them. Through working with HOSTS I have found this to be so true of these children. They want nothing more than the attention and the help of someone who cares about them. I am so glad I had the opportunity to provide such services for these children. As I am planning a career in the ministry to work with children I know these learned concepts will be very helpful.*

In her feedback letter to the HOSTS administrator, Anna similarly encouraged a stronger policy of building relationships between mentors and children. She advised, “Build a relationship with the student. No one knows what [they] are facing at home and they always need someone to love them unconditionally.” This very Christianized language reveals a poignant sense of religious duty Anna seems to have developed and wished to pass on.

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Other artifacts and discussions from the trimester evinced similar expressions of this type of obligation, and I believe this type of noblesse oblige is likely to emerge at other faith-based institutions as well.

### **Suggested Solutions**

How might one respond to these failures? In "It's a Question of Faith," Amy Goodburn discusses her evolving understanding that students' fundamentalist perspectives are as valuable a choice for them as the other critical lenses often preferred by critical pedagogues. A goal, then, is to enable students to recognize their choice of an evangelical Christian mtheod of critique as one of many possible views. I turn briefly now to strategies that may enable future students to more self-consciously explore alternative critical methods and to place their own perspectives within a wider interpretive context.

#### ***Incorporate institutional philosophies into class readings as a focus for reflective activities.***

Publications such as the HOSTS information booklet, written materials from the elementary school, the College Catalog and the marketing materials created by the College Office of Community Service each has a "mission statement" or similar statement of purpose that includes within it a set of implied assumptions about such concepts as "service" and "literacy." To incorporate such publications into the assigned reading material of the class would be to invite scrutiny and critical analysis of these texts similar to analysis of other articles we read. We could then treat such texts as rhetorical constructs and evaluate each critically, reflecting upon their implied assumptions and assessing their relative effectiveness.

#### ***Incorporate into class readings articles that address related issues of citizenry or agency.***

Another approach would be to include readings that would make the "hidden curriculum" of critical pedagogy part of the course discussion. These articles would support students' development of an expanded vocabulary for conceptualizing their community-based work and would complement the development of their expanded vocabulary for thinking about literacy. In addition to articles in the service-learning literature and works by John McKnight and Dorothy Day, these could profitably include Biblical Scriptures that focus on service, community and citizenry.

#### ***Engage students in proposing revisions to published mission statements.***

Perhaps in lieu of—or in addition to—the letters written to the community sites, as a final project students could not only analyze but also propose revisions to the philosophies or statements of purpose published in various institutions' documents. Submitting these revisions to the institutions would send bold messages of serious reflection, serious views of citizenry, and serious concern for community welfare. Asking students to complete such an aggressive (perhaps brassy) assignment communicates the instructor's and the college's committed stance to writing as vehicle of change, participation in community development, and service-learning principles in general.

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