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Surprised By Service: Creating Connections Through Community-Based Writing

This essay explores the many benefits of adding a community-based writing component to the first year composition course. It looks closely at the self-selected projects of 25 freshmen at a large suburban university to show how service-learning creates a context in which students can gain greater control over their own literacy and learn more about self and others.

The most radical step you can take is your next one.

—James Baldwin

Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.

—Oscar Wilde

The Context: Why the Need for a Change?

As writing instructors, we are continually seeking ways to make our classrooms sites where students are actively involved in making meaning, accepting greater responsibility for their own learning, and viewing language as an authentic way to explore self, other, and society at large. One significant means of accomplishing all of these objectives is through service- or community-based learning.¹ While there are any number of ways that service-learning can apply to—and enrich—the goals of the college composition classroom and the lives of its students, this paper looks specifically at my own initial experience in the Fall of 1999 at a large, suburban state university.

Using the words and deeds of the 25 freshman composition students who joined me in this project, I consider the benefits of service-learning in the composition classroom primarily by examining the connections that it has enabled my students to make to their own literacy at a time when many are struggling with the written word and their relationship to it; to their environment at a point when many were feeling a disruption in their lives; to their sense of personal identity at a crossroads when most late adolescents are struggling with self-concept and self-image; and to the “other” at a juncture when many have yet to step beyond their own spheres and concerns.

The Project: Community Service and Writing

My first, and perhaps most important, step in incorporating a service-learning component into the writing curriculum was to think carefully about the objectives that I wanted to achieve through the project. I was guided by Barbara Jacoby’s definition of service-learning, as a:

form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning. (5)

My next goal was to tailor this definition to the writing classroom, so that students would have opportunities not only to offer service and reflect upon it, but also to connect their literacy to authentic goals by writing for genuine audiences and to articulate the experience of doing so in a communal forum. In short, I wanted them to be able to take themselves and their literacy outside of the classroom and to bring their experiences in the larger culture back to share with their learning community. To accomplish this, I envisioned a project with four main components: 1) the service itself, offered in a site of their own choosing; 2) a literacy component based on an identified and negotiated need;

3) a class presentation based on the service experience; and 4) a culminating reflective essay.

On the first day of class, I was—and continue to be—sure to tell my students about the requirements that each student must fulfill for the Community Service and Writing Project:

- select a site at which to do community service
- volunteer at the site for a minimum of eight hours for the semester, either in increments or all at one time
- identify how his or her literacy skills could help the chosen site
- write a proposal by mid-semester explaining how these skills will be used
- develop the literacy project, a copy of which is to be submitted at the semester's end
- talk to other class members about the project informally throughout the semester and more formally in a poster session at semester's end
- reflect about the experience in journal entries that will form the core of a final reflective essay.

I introduced this assignment immediately to give students ample time to switch sections should they desire (although no one did) and stressed that this was not an “added-on” requirement, but one that replaced several former assignments. I also tried in those early weeks to generate excitement for and confidence in the project. For example, we watched a videotape of an Oprah Winfrey Show dedicated to volunteerism; visited the “Service Fair” that the institution sponsors; and attended several social and cultural events being held on campus, including the AIDS Quilt display and a “Take Back the Night” rally. In addition, I modeled my enthusiasm for service-learning by discussing my own project—volunteering at a nearby nursing home in which my relative is a resident—for, to paraphrase Eleanor Roosevelt, we cannot expect others to do that which we are not willing to do ourselves.

Unlike other composition-based service-learning projects described in the literature,² I did not choose specific sites for the students, although the Director of Community Services and I provided information about interested agencies—including many within walking distance of the University. There were a few disappointments, particularly involving agencies that did not return calls or that required reams of paperwork. As one student reflected in her

evaluation of the project: “I think I would have had a better experience if you would have taken charge more. That way I wouldn’t have been ‘on hold’ for weeks waiting for the SPCA to call me back.”

However, these setbacks were far outnumbered by the many more unexpected joys and rewards. For example, how could I have selected for Mike³ the special education class in his hometown elementary school that allowed him to test his career goal of working with disabled children? Or anticipated Jenny’s choice of a softball team for disadvantaged kids in need of an assistant that she read about in the local paper the day after she herself was cut from the college team? How could I have chosen the location that allowed Bill to return to his high school and fill in for his beloved drama coach who had just died of cancer? Or found Kaitlyn—the drama coach’s daughter who coincidentally enough sat next to Bill in this writing class—the perfect site to aid in her own recovery process, assisting in a cheerleading camp for troubled young girls?

“Unspoken Connections”: The Service Experience of Writers

Although the service was done outside of the classroom, it was never very far away. Rather, we held regularly scheduled “updates.” There were also more structured classroom activities, such as a one-on-one interview session, in which students created a semi-structured interview script, took turns asking one another about the progress of their service projects, and wrote up a brief reports based on the interviews.

I believe the culminating poster presentation to be as significant—although perhaps not as obviously so—as other components of the project. For one thing, it provided an open, public forum for students to demonstrate how they were able to use words to make a difference through their literacy projects and to discuss the legitimacy of such an enterprise. Moreover, by openly sharing their literacy projects, students interrogated more fully their sense of what it means to be a writer with authority. For it was they who determined what needed to be written, they who were the “experts,” and they who most clearly understood their unique rhetorical situations. The projects this first semester addressed an amazing range of both audience and context and included nursing home posters, college newspaper editorials, oral

histories, an open letter to church youth, a playbill, and storybooks for children.

As these fledgling writers shared projects and spoke compellingly of goals and felt needs, I could see what a meaningful way this is to give students authority over their words. It both eliminated the uncertainty of exercises where students fret about “giving the teacher what she wants” and afforded them an awareness of a real-life audience that has to be carefully considered and appropriately addressed if the writing is to be a success. Most important, they did desire success.

In addition to this greater understanding of, and sense of control over, the written word, students also experimented in their projects with the visual and material aspects of literacy. Even those projects such as newspaper articles or letters to the editor that retained what Lee Odell calls the “graphocentrism” that characterizes academic writing but little else outside of the academy (48) had an altered material form to fit the appropriate context. And others were more radically changed, as students experimented with colors, pictures, and images gathered from disparate sources to best reach their goals. This spirit of experimentation carried over to the poster presentations, in which students sought to convey their information as personally and graphically as possible through photos, videos, sketches, and collected artifacts from their sites. The presentations thus serve as another object lesson in what it means to convey information effectively and *care* that it be done so.

Connections With the Past

There were other connections forged as well. A striking one was the way many students managed to link their present college student subjectivities with their former lives and with earlier versions of self. As Allison wrote after volunteering at the University’s day care center, “I almost forgot what it was like to be a kid.” For other students, as well, the service project gave them a way to revisit “home” during a period of intense homesickness—but to do so as an adult with authority.

Several examples will suffice here. I have already mentioned drama student/coach Bill, who, in his oral presentation, sang the praises of “trying to help keep an important part of high school alive in [his] mind.” A writer whom I had come to think of as weak because his traditional essays showed so little development or creativity, Bill surprised me at every turn in his

project. His presentation was clear and compelling, and the literacy project—he chose to create advertisements, posters, and press releases for the high school production of *Tom Jones*—excellent as well. But the biggest treat was his reflective essay reviewing his experience as the drama coach for the play. Titled “More Than a Vision” and constructed to appear as a playbill in shape and graphics, the text is well-developed, clear as a bell, and imbued with the confidence and control that mark the strongest of writers.

Another one of the weaker writers in class, Mike, reached even farther back into his past to offer his services in his elementary school, linking also to a future self since he was planning on a career in special education. Once again, all aspects of his project fulfilled his written objective that the project be “really good and also informative” because he was serving in a spot where he was well-liked and could be “very helpful.” This newfound confidence stood in sharp contrast to an earlier self-assessment that his written products rarely met length requirements and were “never any good.” In fact, his reflective essay far exceeded the two page minimum, with well-developed, clearly organized, and grammatically correct paragraphs throughout.

I have come to believe that service-learning projects hold the promise of a particular benefit for many young men who sit in our writing classes. So often they are sullen, angry, or anxious about their own literacy skills—especially since reading and writing have been branded by the culture as “female” activities (Smith 57)—and seem to feel an overall uneasiness about having to relinquish, upon entering college, much of the “male status bonus” (Tromel-Plotz 8) that they enjoyed in the larger society. For example, in response to a writing inventory prompt that began, “When I write I feel...,” male student after student wrote during the early weeks of class about feelings of resentment and frustration at having to write. Further, they expressed a longing to be “active” and “out of doors where I can feel at home and be myself,” as well as a fear

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that “nothing I write is ever any good.” The above examples of Bill and Mike join many other male voices that semester who—in writing comments such as “it made me feel like I was needed”; “it gave me a chance to prove myself”; and “I was able to use my expertise to help out”—demonstrated their appreciation of an opportunity to regain some authority and identity-boost.

Christy was another student in this class who was able to use the project as a way to serve

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others while also serving her own needs. Christy disclosed in her writing early in the semester that she was struggling with feelings of intense longing for her friends and extended family since her mother had moved the two of them to the area several months before. Her sense of isolation and abandonment left her with suicidal tenden-

cies. An air of defensive gloom permeated her presence and her writing, which lacked affect or any personal involvement regardless of the subject matter.

But it also led her to the Big Brothers/Big Sisters, where she found Mary, a twelve year old girl who needed help with her reading. A portion of Christy’s reflective essay—while it still betrays her characteristic tentativeness and a lack of confidence—shows how this service project was able to return to Christy some control over her life and her environment:

I never would have thought that a little bit of volunteer work would have much of an impact on me, but it has. Even though I’m doing something so small as tutoring, I always leave smiling, in part because it reminds me of my eleven year old cousin back home. The time I’ve spent at Big Brother Big Sister has really changed my outlook on many things....I have been tutoring Mary in reading three days a week. I decided to go beyond the required hours because I don’t think it would be fair to abandon her after only eight sessions. So I’ve stuck with it.... This experience has made me see that there are people out there who really care.... I am staying as Mary’s tutor for as long as she needs me. Volunteering really opened my eyes!

Connections with the Power of Words

By providing occasions for authentic writing, the service-learning experience can open students’ eyes in ways that we can’t predict. It can also help them to form another connection—to their own words and the ways that they can use these words to shape and change their reality. In project after project, I heard from students for whom words were mattering for the first time, students who, before now, had been passively going through the motions of their writing classes, failing to see how language could make a difference in their own lives or the lives of others. And so, for example, deeply religious Susan was able to write with conviction for her church bulletin about her newly formed youth “coffeehouse” and watch as the numbers of participants grew. Similarly, ecologically frustrated “Tim Oaks,” so nicknamed because of his love of nature, saw the fruits of his article in the student newspaper when a large group joined him the following Saturday for his weekly “litter round-up.”

Indeed, sometimes this understanding of the power that words hold came about accidentally, such as in the wonderful storybook that Cathy wrote (and recruited her boyfriend to illustrate) for the children at the local Women in Crisis Center. Titled “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs—the Conspiracy Behind the Story We All Know and Love,” it gives the narrative power to Snow herself. Cathy’s version, which opened with “Recently, Snow White has revealed the story the way it actually happened,” enabled her to tell a powerful story of betrayal at the hands of the hired mercenaries—the dwarfs—and of Snow’s personal bravery. It wasn’t until after Cathy and I talked for awhile about children’s stories and their “happily-ever-afters” that she realized that she had subverted the patriarchal tradition in which helpless females need to be rescued by a male hero. Moreover, she realized with pride that her words had created a new model for these children, whose own mothers had found out the hard way that sometimes Prince Charming turns out to be the Big Bad Wolf.

Connections with Others

But perhaps the most rewarding aspect of this project has been the way it has enabled students to recognize the “others” in our society, either indirectly from talking and listening to class-

mates' experiences, or more immediately, by meeting and working with people with whom they might otherwise never come into contact. Indeed, one of the goals of student-centered teaching is to create "contact zones"—contested social spaces where, in negotiating new understandings, "many cultures may meet, clash and grapple with one another" (Pratt 34). However, in my experience, freshman composition has often seemed much more a "dead zone" than a contact zone. Far from engaging in genuine and potentially transformative dialogue, my students have often sought rather to ease their internal conflicts—between their desire to control their own destiny and their awareness of the Institution's power; between their hope of succeeding academically and their uncertainty about their ability to do so; and between immaturity and burgeoning adulthood—by shying away from any struggle at all. Too often, they have expressed their desire—in word and action—that the classroom be as secure, conflict-free and unilateral as possible.

By engaging in the outside world, in a context that they may perceive as more legitimate and less institutionally controlled, barriers between self and other can fade; indeed, many of these students' culminating essays reflected on the melting away—at least temporarily—of stereotypes, fears, and ignorance of the "other." These sentiments were strongly expressed by the many students who worked with the elderly and with children and adults with physical disabilities in schools, basketball clinics and a nearby nursing home.

However, Jack—a seventeen-year-old who lived at home with his parents—took a different, and certainly unique, route. His project brought him to the neighboring farm of—in Jack's words—"a very old (age 65) family friend" who had just been diagnosed with cancer. Jack's original plan was to help the neighbor with his chores and to "make up flyers and signs advertising the need for help," but after several weeks on the farm a new project came to mind—an oral history that Jack would transcribe as the farmer spoke. Although his neighbor at first rejected the idea, thinking it frivolous and embarrassing, eventually the project took shape. Jack described it this way:

We would talk for hours as he shared stories about his childhood and life on the farm. I had fun listening to his opinions

and views, and I could tell that he was having fun remembering.... I would go to the house every weekend and always ate breakfast with the family.... I met almost every member of the family during these visits, since they all helped out in one way or another. It was amazing to see how supportive everyone was.... This whole project has touched me in a way that I will remember for the rest of my life. As soon it began, I became much happier all of the time.... Now our semester is over, but I am not finished my project. I plan on continuing to work on Mr. W.'s farm and to write down his memories as long as he feels like talking.

Perhaps the most unusual service experience that first semester was occasioned by a visit to our university of "The Wall That Heals," a traveling replica of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC. Julie and Todd responded to the call that went through campus asking for students to guard the wall and to help visitors to find the names of their loved ones. Julie had lost an uncle to the war, while Todd's curiosity had been piqued by the Tim O'Brien short story "The Things They Carried."

Their literacy project was a collaborative article promoting the exhibit in the school newspaper. But it was their reflective essays, read aloud to the class, that made the biggest impact on us as a group. Listen, for example, as Julie describes her encounter with an unexpected "other":

One day while I was working a veteran came over to me and told me not to be scared, but in a few minutes the bikers were coming. He told me that they were members of a Vietnam Veterans' biker group, and that they always came with their families to these types of things. So when these big guys came in with beards down to their waists, long hair, and motorcycle jackets, I treated them just as I would anyone else who walked in. Some of them had kids and wives with them and came in with the biggest smiles and the greatest attitudes of anyone there. They turned out to be the nicest group of guys and told me about all of the charity things they do as a group, such as a bike ride that they do for Toys for Tots.

Todd wrote compellingly as well about his own

discoveries made during this experience: of self and other, of society and history, of sacrifice and patriotism. The honesty of his prose struck me as particularly meaningful because earlier in the semester, Todd's passive behavior had been typical of all too many of the young men in our writing classrooms. Although he was a strong writer and attentive to matters that could affect his grade, he remained silent and inexpressive and could often be found staring into space. He reminded me of what Mary Hiatt calls the "student at bay" (39-41), the type of student who Robert Connors describes in this way:

...usually male, [he] agrees with everything a teacher says and takes directions gratefully, does as little as he can, never volunteers, and who leaves the course having given as little of his real self as possible. (155)

Leaving the confines of the academy and returning to the "real" world of words and deeds that had significance to him seemed to give Todd the freedom not only to experience emotion but to articulate it, to participate in the stories of others and place himself within their midst:

I walked slowly by the wall and reached out and touched some of the names. The feeling of my skin against the grooves of the names sent a chill down my spineEven though I didn't know anyone listed on the wall, reading throughout he names made me feel an unspoken connection to the dead soldiers.... I walked over to a truck that had various objects left at the Vietnam Wall over the years. There was everything from flowers to letters to actual clothing. I sat to read the letters; they were so emotional. In them, family members wrote about how proud they were of their sons or daughters and how much they will miss them. It suddenly struck me that not only the lives of 52,000 fallen soldiers were affected by the War, but also thousands and thousands of family members and friends.... One interesting story was from a man who went to high school with a soldier who everyone thought had perished during the war....but he had a friend who was sure he had spotted that same man five years ago....He thought that maybe his high school friend had been wrongly mistaken as a casualty....Together we checked the database and found that,

sure enough, his friend's name was listed. But the puzzle is that we'll never actually know if he did die in the war or if his name was incorrectly placed on the Wall.

By participating in the stories of these "others," by learning about and reflecting on the lives of ordinary folks, the everyday was made visible for my students at a time in our culture when celebrity and extremity seem to be all.

As did so many others, Todd concluded his reflective essay with an expression of his sense of personal enrichment:

Although I helped out the community by handing out pamphlets and looking up names on the computer, I was the beneficiary that day, since I personally gained so much through this amazing experience. I have a newfound respect and admiration for veterans and appreciate so much more what their sacrifice has meant for this country. I heard stories and saw things that will stay with me forever. I have already made plans to travel over break to Washington DC with my whole family to view the real Vietnam Wall.

"Giveaways": Concluding Comments

There was never a time during that semester that I detected students feeling that they were being forced to do some meaningless activity cooked up by a sadistic teacher, or worse still, that they were off doing "charity work," giving but never receiving or learning. Neither did they express a sense of only taking—although many were admittedly pleased to be admired and useful. Rather, what I saw evinced in the radiant faces during presentations and read in the thoughtful reflective essays and literacy projects was a great willingness to make commitments and connections—to their words, to the communities of their past, present, and future, and to the community of humanity.

In an essay entitled "Giveaways," Mohawk writer Beth Brant describes her world this way:

[It is like] living in the eye of the hurricane—terrible, beautiful, filled with sounds and silences, the music of life-affirmation and the disharmony of life-despising. To balance, to create in this midst, is a gift of honor and respect. (944)

As we prepare our students to take their place

as world citizens of the 21st century, we can offer service-learning in our writing classes as one way to encourage them to comprehend the power of words and to use their literacy to expand rather than circumscribe their horizons; to build a sense of personal identity and greater community; and to use new understandings of self and other to create an integrated and reciprocal vision to share with one another. As teachers, what finer gift can we give?

Notes

¹ See, for example, Linda Adler-Kassner, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters (Eds.), *Writing the Community: Models for Service-Learning in Composition* (AAHE, 1997); David Cooper and Laura Julier, "Writing the Ties that Bind: Service-Learning in the Writing Classroom" (*MJCSL* 2 (1995): 72-85); Karis Crawford, "Community Service Writing in an Advanced Composition Class," in *Praxis I. A Faculty Casebook on Community Service Learning*, Jeffrey Howard (Ed.), (OCSL Press: University of Michigan, 1993).

² See, for example, Gary Eddy and Jane Carducci's "Service with a Smile: Class and Community in Advanced Composition" (*The Writing Instructor* 16.2 (1997): 78-88) and Cynthia Novak and Lorie Goodman's "Safe/r Contact Zones: The Call of Service Learning" (*The Writing Instructor* 16.2 (1997): 65-77).

³ Mike is a pseudonym, as are all of the student names used in this paper.

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