

In a Heartbeat: Academic and Affective Benefits of an Intergenerational Exploration of Memoir

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This article explains the procedure, content, and impact of a unique intergenerational exchange: the service-learning component of a capstone writing course focused on the complex genre of memoir. The investigation of memoir writing was conducted both theoretically and experientially as undergraduate writers worked in pairs to "ghost write" the memoirs of a fascinating group of senior citizens. This exploration of memoir—and of age as a frequently overlooked dimension of diversity—proved a powerful nexus for demonstrating the long-held belief that carefully-structured, community-based pedagogy significantly benefits its participants both affectively and academically.

Designing a capstone course for undergraduate English writing majors, I selected the rich, complex, and increasingly popular genre of memoir as the focus and decided to include an intergenerational field component. Although studies of diversity commonly focus upon race, ethnicity, or gender, interrogating age as a source of difference offers a frequently overlooked opportunity. This article explains the procedure, content, and impact of the intergenerational exchange, structured to support student writers' investigation of and experimentation with memoir writing, while also providing a rich opportunity to explore the diversity afforded by generational difference. The intergenerational field component provided a nexus for demonstrating the affective and academic benefits of service-learning within a senior-level composition course.

Course Design

This one-semester course entailed a multi-layered investigation of the complex genre of memoir. Assignments and class discussions explored memoir theory, professionally-written memoirs, and the relationships among them. Theoretical discussions

addressed the work of Patricia Hampl, Vivian Gornick, William Zinsser, and Frank McCourt among others; Gornick's *The Situation and the Story*, and Zinsser's *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* and *Writing About Your Life* served as central texts. The professionally-published memoirs we discussed included short segments from more than a dozen works by such well known memoirists as Richard Wright, Russell Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Primo Levi. We also considered three book-length works and one film: Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments*, Jill Kerr Conway's *The Road from Coorain*, Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City*, and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. To prepare for class discussions, students wrote short reflection papers after reading each text. Students were encouraged to draw connections between aspects of memoir theory and the specific memoir selections assigned. Discussions, in turn, linked aspects of theory to their realization within specific memoirs. So, for example, one lens we repeatedly used was Gornick's valuable distinction between the situation and the story. As Gornick explains, "The situation is the context or circumstance...; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say" ("Situation" 13). Thus, with each memoir, we would quickly recap the "situation"—the details of the individual's life—and then proceed to debate at length the real "story"—the essence of what the narrator was choosing to share.

Although significant time was spent on reading and interrogating these texts, this was, in fact, a writing capstone, and so the primary assignment was to develop a portfolio. In addition to writing the short reflective essays mentioned above, students were given three major writing assignments: 1) a critical analysis in which students used memoir theory to compare and contrast three book-length memoirs; 2) a substantial segment of their own memoir, submitted in segments and workshopped periodically throughout the course (in which, of course, they needed to decide what they "had come to say"); and 3) their version of the senior citizen's memoir, a kind of "ghost writing" attempt to capture selected memories in the voice of the original teller. This service-learning component of the course was also structured to reflect the memoir theories discussed. At the end of the course, all of these assignments were submitted in a portfolio along with two metawriting assignments: a process essay explaining the procedures and features distinguishing the response essays, the critical analysis, the personal memoir and the senior memoir; and a more personal reflection examining each student's growth and development as a writer through the capstone experience.

The Senior Exchange

The “senior memoir” aspect of the course began somewhat serendipitously though a casual conversation among colleagues, but proved a unique and incredibly rich component of the course. Students were paired with residents of a nearby senior citizen independent living residence who had incredible stories to tell and were eager to do so while still able, confirming Zinsser’s assertion that “writing about one’s life is a powerful human need” (6). The exchange provided for an optimal service-learning experience since my fledgling writers needed material, and the senior citizens welcomed assistance in articulating their stories. The program director at the residence, Jill Wagner, secured commitments from

six residents. During an initial class joint session, the senior citizens began to share a bit of their backgrounds with us. Jill had previously suggested that residents may wish to focus their memoir segment upon their memories of the World War

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II years, since that was a critical period in their lives and they were, then, roughly the same age as my students are now. Incredible stories began to unfold. During the next class period, two days later, I asked my twelve students, working in pairs, to indicate, in “secret ballot,” their first choice of a senior with whom to work. Only two groups selected the same individual, and it was clear that the students, with what little they knew, were already feeling “connected” and fascinated with some aspect of a particular senior’s story. The affective benefit of the partnership had already surfaced.

The Nexus of Academic and Affective Benefits

A core belief of service-learning is that its benefits are substantially academic, despite some critics’ dismissals of the pedagogy as solely altruistic or affective. Well structured service-learning experiences are, of course, integrally connected to course curriculum and credibly grounded in valuable learning theory in the works of John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Mikhail Bakhtin and others (see Carter; Jacoby; and Zlotkowski). Community-based pedagogies offer powerful ways to teach content and develop skills.

Exploring the Complexities of Memoir

The academic benefits of this intergenerational exchange included an increased understanding of memoir theory, a significant emphasis of the course. For example, all memoir theorists speak of the pervasive aspect of self-discovery in memoir. As Vivian Gornick states, memoir “undertakes to trace the internal movement away from

the murk of being told who you are by the accident of circumstance toward the clarity that identifies accurately the impulses of the self that [Willa] Cather calls inviolable" (93). Patricia Hampl refers to that "trace" as a journey. In fact, she goes so far as to say that "[m]emoir is travel writing," though the memoirist is not a tourist, but rather "a pilgrim, seeking, wondering" (1014). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. insists that one needs to "start writing," and then the entire act will become one of "self-discovery" (108). Similarly, William Zinsser insists that memoirists let themselves discover along the way, warning:

Don't visualize the finished product at the end of your journey; it will look different when you get there. Be ready to be surprised by the crazy, wonderful events that will come dancing out of your past when your stir the pot of memory. (6)

My students witnessed this process of self-discovery within their seniors and simultaneously discovered a great deal about themselves. Several of the students discovered that, as Melinda put it, "everyone has a story to tell." Admitting that she had "always assumed that people write memoirs when something amazing or terrifying happens to them," she learned that rather often memoirs are "snippets of the uneventful lives of some ordinary—but still extraordinary—people." Her discovery validates Zinsser's emphasis on the value of the ordinary, the simple, and the powerful human need to tell stories. Take Fran, for example, who served the United States as a fighter bomber pilot during World War II. Once a young man, one of thirteen children in a family on the near side north of Chicago, and then one day off to pilot training, filled with knowledge "of the destruction Hitler was causing all through Eastern Europe" and longing "to do something more" in the name of his Polish relatives suffering abroad, though admittedly facing it all "with a tinge of anxiety." Eamon, who co-authored Fran's memoir, at first struggled to articulate the significance of what Fran had told him. Eamon explained:

I want to show Fran's humanity in a time of great peril. The fact that he still gets choked up just thinking about his fellow soldiers is a testament to how much he cares for them even now. I want to show that through war there are people who come out of it battered and torn but in the end are okay and can go on with their lives. Fran is a shining example of this idea, and I think if I can be successful in showing his humanity throughout his times of strife, I will be successful.

This exchange clearly resulted in self-discovery for both the senior citizen and the student ghost writer.

Similarly, consider the self-discovery of Geoff, a student who co-authored the memoir of Ilse, a diminutive lady of German Jewish heritage whose family escaped on the last transport Hitler allowed to leave Berlin. Forced to leave her entire extended family behind—all of whom she would later learn were exterminated in the camps—she and her parents, tragically unwelcome at that point in the United States, were provided refuge in Cuba. Her story is one of gratitude to the “country of Cuba for their courtesy,” until she and her parents were eventually granted asylum in the U.S. (Ironically she always longed to return to Cuba, but due to subsequent political tension, American restrictions, and in recent years, her own health, Ilse was never able to do so.) Geoff acknowledges his self-discovery regarding the power of the human spirit. Initially, he had thought that Ilse “would be very depressing to talk to, but she has been the total opposite.... She never lets it be seen that she was saddened by her dramatic experience” and “is a very happy person.” Indeed, Ilse (and her student ghost writers, I believe) discovered that memoir writing enables the “struggle to clarify one’s own formative experience” (Gornick 117). Significantly, as Vivian Gornick posits, “that principle at work is what makes memoir literature rather than testament” (117).

Memoir not only promotes self-discovery. It also provides historical insight. As Zinsser argues, “The best memoirs are frozen in a particular time and place and social or historical condition” (27). Or as Patricia Hampl phrases it, “True memoir is written in an attempt to find not only a self but a world. Actually, it begins as hunger for a world, one gone or lost, effaced by time or a more sudden brutality. But in the act of remembering, the personal environment expands and resonates beyond itself, beyond its ‘subject,’ into the endless and tragic recollection that is history” (1013).

Once again the service-learning experience supported the academic goals of the course. Clearly, my students learned a great deal of history firsthand from the senior citizens. They learned about Ms. Lucille’s adventures in a small, rural, segregated Black school in Money, Mississippi, in the early 1940s, where she had been chosen as a talented high school graduate to teach “the beginners.” She “had not yet gone to college when the State Board of Education came...in hopes of finding qualified individuals to improve the learning conditions of...rural schools.” Although she loved her teaching and “wouldn’t trade it for anything,” Lucille resigned and headed North with the promise of a higher paying job. Little did she know when she walked

out of that tiny schoolroom, she would find her way to the University of Chicago, go through an intensive two-day interview process, and “on December 27, 1944... walk through those gates...where [she] donned a white surgical gown, not realizing “at the time, donning that gown was [her] first step towards helping create the first atomic bomb.” And the students learned about the challenges of a seemingly ordinary housewife in the 1940s who recalled, “I left Idaho after getting married on my high school graduation day. I wore the same dress that day, for two different ceremonies.... I hardly ever went back...[because] of course, this was in the 1940s, and there was a war going on, and I now lived with my husband on the other side of the country in New York. Telephones were not nearly as common as they are today, and my husband was too busy working.” And my students learned about Dorothy growing up in the pre-Civil Rights South where, “aside from things like poll taxes, Blacks would have to know the entire Constitution by memory before they were allowed to cast a ballot.” Dorothy still recalls the day her friend who “had a photographic memory and had easily put their entire Constitution between her ears” went “proud, with her head held high...to the polling station and answered all the questions correctly.” After her friend voted, however, “the official took her ballot, and looking her dead in the eyes, tore it into pieces.” History became very real, very tangible, and sometimes very painful.

Expanding Writer Competencies

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the art of composing itself. Students faced very real challenges with important elements of composition, including description, selectivity, and voice.

William Zinsser reminds us that a good memoir writer relies heavily on description—on giving us a “picture of what the place looked like and felt like” (104). Some of the students struggled

with eliciting detail from the memories of their seniors. As Adam reported, “I really thought at the beginning that it was going to be difficult to get enough information about something in her life, ... [But] luckily, we ended up with plenty of things to work with.” The students soon discovered, however, that it was not the number of details that mattered. As Zinsser admonishes us, a memoir writer needs to discover

“why” some detail “stick[s] in your mind” (104). He insists that it “sticks because it embodies an idea that’s larger than the place itself. When nonfiction is raised to an art, it’s usually because the writer imposed on the facts an organizing shape or notion—an *idea*—that hadn’t been attached to them before” (104). Gradually, most of the students were able to unearth the “why” quite insightfully. As Melinda reported, Fran “was not the easiest man to interview, partly because he has a great memory, which led to many, many details and names and places”; but she soon realized that “Fran is haunted by the war. He covers this up with statistics and names of hundreds of odd people. He doesn’t talk about what he saw, but shows it in his eyes.” I believe that Melinda accurately uncovered the “why” of Fran’s details.

Selectivity was another authorial challenge for my students. As one student reported about writing in both her personal and her ghost written memoir, “The hardest thing... was deciding what information I wouldn’t use.” Ginny reported that she “began by visiting Lucille several times and worked on getting her to tell her stories and the memories that she found most important. . . then outlined with her a common theme that could run through the piece and made a list of all of the different events or bits of information that we thought should be included.” Interestingly, one of the senior citizens noted in an exit response his own dilemma with selectivity and admitted that “deciding what part of a long life to discuss was challenging. The fact that I tried to cover too much ground later frustrated me.” Gradually, students and seniors alike were forced to select and focus, constantly guided by the “why” behind the many, many “whats.” In other words, they were forced to respond to Zinsser’s advice to “think small” and value the richness in quality over quantity (6).

The most challenging, and academically beneficial, aspect of this writing project involved struggles with voice—that special, often ineffable aspect of writing that blends authorial intent and personality and enables an audience to “hear” and “sense” the presence of a unique individual. Every one of the students commented on the challenges of attempting to write in first person in the “voice” of another. Some ultimately approached it in a similar manner to fiction writing, creating a first person voice for a character, but now of course, the writing needed to be truthful—truthful to the senior citizen, to his or her voice and personality, to memories, and in some cases, to requests to leave certain things unsaid. Students reported that being forced to adopt a first person voice other than their own was both challenging and beneficial to them as developing writers. For example, Samantha reported difficulty adopting the more constrained personal voice of Ilse when her own was characteristically much more

emotive. Yet, Samantha acknowledged that the requirement “was beneficial because it taught me to broaden my horizons and try new things... I learned how to be a more advanced writer because now I am better at being both descriptive and informative.” Similarly, Eamon recognized his growth as a developing fiction writer, acknowledging that he “was given a living person and told to construct his world and in the end that’s really all fiction is.” Yet, he also acknowledged that his “typical” fiction characters were “completely opposite” the “happy, spiritual” man that Fran revealed himself to be. Since Eamon had to “stay true to him [Fran],” Eamon concluded that “the senior memoir was an exercise in discipline” that ultimately enabled him to construct a new dimension of himself as a writer. Similarly, Geoff wrote that he “did learn a lot” because it was “cool to write from another person’s point of view.” In his words, “It taught me how to adjust my voice.” Other students admitted that they were never able to fully do justice to the voices of their seniors. Beverly, for example, confessed that “mastering Lucille’s voice was extremely difficult” and that she “would need more time to truly do it the justice that her voice deserves.”

Valuing the Human Elements

For me, the most satisfying aspect of the students’ academic growth involved their genuine concern for the seniors, which moved them out of the stereotypical grade-motivated students’ roles. As Adam phrased it, “All I really wanted to do in

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this project was write something that [Sybil] was happy with, and I was glad that it turned out that way.” Indeed, the most frequently voiced student concern throughout the course was the fear that as fledging writers they would not be able to do justice to these interesting

people with powerful stories of real human beings—human beings with long lives of complex experiences to share. As Beverly quite bluntly voiced it in her exit reflection, “The thought that I would be a ghost-writer for someone who would be able to keep a copy of my work scared the hell out of me. I no longer had to just worry about how my work affected me, but how it would affect the woman I was going to be writing about and for.” The kind of realization, shared by virtually all of my students, is surely testament to the power of service-learning and to both its academic and affective benefits. Thanks to the relationships and the real world connection, the stakes and motivations transcended grades and translated into significantly greater

attention to detail and to genuine growth in composition skills. As Geoff phrased his support for continuing to include this kind of intergenerational exchange within a memoir course, the benefits are twofold: “You have a positive personal experience by assisting an elder person, and you do learn something while doing it... I was used to writing in my own style, but I couldn’t continue to do that because she sounds different than I do.”

Another essential element of the memoir genre also contributed to the synergy of academic and affective benefits of the intergenerational exchange: the memoirist’s search for wisdom. Consider Gornick’s definition of memoir as “a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform events, deliver wisdom” (91). My students frequently shared their amazement at what some of their seniors had not only survived, but actually “thrived” through: the premature deaths of children; the devastation of war; the atrocity of genocide; the pain of racial prejudice; the loneliness of transplantation; the futility of alcoholism, and on and on. Several of my students appreciated the frequent new insights they gained through co-constructing the seniors’ memoirs, recalling Zinsser’s advice to “tell your story plainly and deeper truths will emerge” (109). Interestingly, one of the senior citizens similarly concluded that this exchange was “a very valuable project” because “it shows the students how difficult life can be and serves as an example to appreciate security and comfort of today.”

Of course, there were challenges attendant to this course. Students complained at times of scheduling constraints (after two initial class meetings, all of the interviews and drafting sessions were conducted on the students’ own time) and a few voiced frustration with their senior companion’s unwillingness to include some information, to really “open up” on certain feelings, or to give honest, quality feedback on students’ drafts. I suspect that multiple factors were at play here. Some of the seniors self-censored because they struggled with not wanting to hurt the feelings of family members if they were to put certain memories in writing, some because they did not want to re-live emotional trials, saying, “I have forgotten that now” or “I am not going back over that anymore.” Of course, even when the students were disappointed with such responses, they needed to be sensitive to the ethical responsibility involved with memoir writing that we discussed prior to meeting the senior citizens. Regarding the student drafts, some of the senior citizens expressed feeling too inadequate as writers themselves to critique the work of another, while some were unwilling to

criticize anything out of sheer gratitude for the time and effort the young people devoted to the project.

But overall, the affective benefits were extremely positive. Over and over again in exit reflections, students about importance of the relationships they formed: “The most satisfying thing about this project was knowing that Ilse enjoyed our story. When we read it to her we could tell that it would bring back her memories of that time. In essence, we did capture a moment in her life”; “The most rewarding aspect of this project was definitely learning about such an amazing woman’s life”; or “Most satisfying was just getting to know Fran; he is an amazing guy. It was nice to let him talk his way through the pain of the war”; “It was fun to help out Dorothy. I actually learned a lot from her about civil rights, about being a teacher, and just being a person with a purpose.” Eamon’s painfully honest remarks also provide valuable insights into the results of this exchange:

Initially, I wasn’t too crazy about doing the project because I’m not really a fan of old people. They don’t normally get my humor, and I tend to use a lot of it. But as it went on, Fran and I found a place to meet in terms of the writing and it worked out. I’m really glad I did the project now, and looking back I think I gained a lot from it in terms of knowing how to deal and interact with older people.

Indeed, shortly after the term ended, Eamon and his co-author Melinda contacted me for Fran’s address, wanting to send him a Father’s Day card. Other interesting relationships grew out of this intergenerational exchange, as well. Some students took their senior companions out for “ice cream dates” and wrote *follow up* letters. One of the seniors identified the most satisfying or valuable aspect of the project as “the fact that college students and ‘seniors’ up to 85 years of age can find interest in each other.”

Investigating Memoir in a Service-Learning Context

Clearly, this experience confirmed service-learning’s potential as a rich source of both academic and affective benefits to all participants. An important next step would be to conduct more systematic analyses of the students’ growth as writers through the service-learning component of this course. For example, comprehensive discourse analysis measuring accommodations in “voice,” comparing the students’ own memoir segments with that of the memoirs they wrote in the senior citizen’s voices, would be a worthwhile addition to this course experiment. Ames and Diepstra’s research into

intergenerational oral history projects as a means to teach human behavior concepts and Waite and Tatchell's study of reminiscence therapy's impact on novice practitioners in a service-learning course provide additional models of qualitative inquiry into this kind of intergenerational exchange.

As it stands, this project echoes Susie Lan Cassel's previously-reported experience with an immigrant-based oral history recovery project. Like Cassel's course, this exchange temporarily blurred "the artificial divisions between university and society, folding students and community members alike into a richer and more complex web of human space" (16). This service learning course also proved extremely valuable as an academic endeavor, challenging developing writers on numerous levels and allowing for a unique exploration of diversity based upon age. And so, as a student in the class expressed both her feelings and my own, "I would do it again in a heartbeat."

Notes

1. I would like to thank Program Director Jill Wagner, and the wonderful senior citizens of Oak Park Arms, who so generously shared their lives with my students, making this intergenerational exchange a reality. I also gratefully acknowledge the anonymous reviewers of this article, whose generous, extensive and insightful comments helped to shape it.
2. These unpublished course documents, plus an exit survey, are the source of the student comments quoted here. All student references are pseudonyms. Some of the senior citizens requested that their names be used; others preferred pseudonyms. In each case, the participant's wishes have been respected.

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