

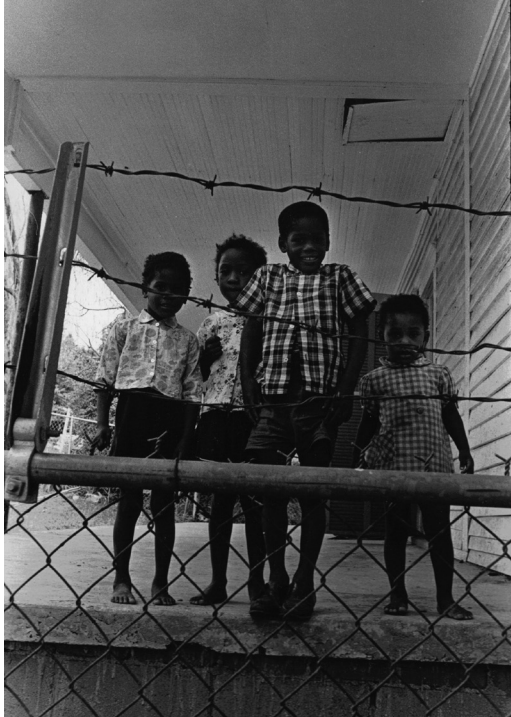
Zandra L. Jordan, Spelman College

This article discusses found literacy partnerships—collaborations around literacy practices that emerge unexpectedly when Spelman College students enact the spirit of service and activism that has defined the historically black liberal arts college for women since its inception. Through an examination of institutional rhetoric, a required general education course and three student cases, the article considers the relationship between doing and becoming as students' literacies align with the interests of community agencies. Literacy partnerships are not always planned; they can emerge from a spirit of service and commitment to activism that encourages students not just to do service, but to become, through their doing, civic-minded women who use their literacies to promote positive social change.

Established in 1881, Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary, now Spelman College,¹ began in the basement of Friendship Baptist Church, then the largest black Baptist church in Atlanta, GA. The pastor, Reverend Frank Quarles, offered the basement to the school's founders, Sophia B. Packard and Harriet E. Giles, who started the school with just "eleven students—ten women, some former slaves, and one girl" (*History and Traditions* 5). Packard and Giles, both missionaries and teachers, were part of "the wave of Northern missionaries coming

1 In 1884, the name was changed to Spelman Seminary in honor of longtime anti-slavery activists Laura Spelman Rockefeller and her parents Harvey Buel and Lucy Henry Spelman. The name was changed again in 1924 to Spelman College.

South to provide education and Christian training to more than one million freed people” (3). This historic church-school partnership is endemic of the kinds of literacy partnerships that are part of Spelman’s continuing legacy. For more than a century, Spelman students, emboldened by the example of alumnae like Marion Wright Edleman, have partnered with local communities and agencies to support the literacy education of those living in nearby neighborhoods.



Peoplestown and Summerhill children, early 1970s²

The 1971 Summerhill reading clinic is one example among many of Spelman’s rich history of literacy partnerships. On Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 12 noon, approximately “80 Black tutors” from Spelman and other Atlanta University Center³ institutions, as well as Emory University and Georgia State University, conducted a reading clinic at the Postal Street Academy on Capitol Avenue for children living in Summerhill, a predominantly Black, inner city neighborhood near downtown Atlanta. Coordinated by Spelman sophomore Virginia

- 2 Courtesy of Emmaus House, an Episcopal community center situated in the Peoplestown and Summerhill neighborhoods, this photo depicts local children on the Emmaus House porch in the early 1970s. Herman Shackleford (center) and his sister (far left) grew up in the Peoplestown-Summerhill community. The identities of the other children pictured are unknown.
- 3 Spelman College is part of the Atlanta University Center, a consortium of historically Black institutions that includes Clark Atlanta University, the Interdenominational Theological Seminary, Morehouse College and Morehouse School of Medicine.



Davis, the tutors worked with approximately 85 children ranging in age from five to thirteen. Although teaching reading skills was the primary purpose of the clinic, some of the larger structural issues impacting the achievement of Summerhill children, such as cultural dissonance between classroom teachers and students and limited access to educational and cultural experiences outside of Summerhill, were reflected in the clinic objectives: “to promote self-awareness, to create situations conducive to study, to improve scholastic performance, to bridge the gap between teacher and student, to encourage parental concern, and to expose the child to his environment” (Peters 33).

The former Virginia Davis, now Virginia Davis Floyd, developed the reading clinic objectives in collaboration with community activist and now Atlanta City Councilman C. T. Martin. The reading clinic was an offshoot of the Atlanta Postal Street Academies, which Martin initiated in 1970 to address the growing high school dropout rate among Black youth. Martin “worked for the Post Office,” Floyd recalls, “and somehow convinced them to lend Post Office resources to identify high school dropouts and form the Postal Street Academy.” One of the original college tutors recruited by Martin, Floyd was an Academy tutor for a semester when she suggested that the program might be more successful if they started with younger children. Martin promptly put Floyd in charge of developing a reading clinic (Floyd, personal interview).

Under Floyd’s leadership, each Saturday the Summerhill reading clinic tutors prepared breakfast and lunch for the children, mindful that “the growl of a stomach is much too distracting” for the children to ignore (Peters 33). They visited the children at home to assess their needs. Recognizing one child’s delayed speech development, the tutors connected the child’s family with “a speech and hearing specialist.” To promote exercise, they brought the children to “Spelman’s gymnasium for swimming, basketball, tumbling...and other activities.” The tutors also organized a health clinic “with the assistance of Dr. Audrey Forbes



Manley,⁴ [Spelman alumna and] wife of the president of Spelman College, Dr. Albert E. Manley. Dr. Forbes [Manley], an outstanding pediatrician, Dr. Clinton Warner, Spelman College physician, and Dr. James Densler, an Atlanta surgeon” conducted health exams and provided services, including “dental work and eyeglasses” (33).

When Floyd received a Merrill Scholarship to study abroad, she entrusted the reading clinic to her Spelman classmate and best friend Darnell Ivory (personal interviews), who was “one of the original tutors of the program” (“Street Academy Clinic” 1). Under Ivory’s direction, each session started and concluded “with a chant of blackness to instill in the children a sense of togetherness” (1). The clinic curriculum was “divided into four different ‘classes’ [on] black history, math, science and reading” (1). According to Ivory, the tutors also spent time in Summerhill playing softball with the children and visiting with their families (personal interview). “Twice a month,” the tutors took the children on field trips to cultural events, baseball games, the Spelman College Biology Department and other campus facilities (“Street Academy Clinic” 1; Ivory, personal interview). They even held a Christmas celebration for the children in the Spelman College gymnasium that was catered by Spelman’s dining service (Ivory, personal interview).

Neither Floyd nor Ivory know what became of the clinic after they graduated in 1973, but it made a lasting impression on them both (personal interviews). Reflecting upon her deep investment in the Summerhill reading clinic and the support that Spelman College provided, Floyd exclaimed, “I learned at Spelman that college is much more than grades. Spelman was a resource to the community in which it sits...Once you are touched like this, wherever you go you have to do this kind of work” (personal interview). The recipient of “numerous awards for her leadership in health policy, advocacy of the under-served, and as a

4 In addition to many other professional accomplishments, Dr. Audrey Forbes Manley served as the President of Spelman College from 1997 until her retirement in 2002. She is the first alumna to hold the elected position (“History in Brief”).



medical educator” (“Biography”), Floyd has continued “to do this kind of work” by becoming a resource to communities in need at home and abroad. The Atlanta Postal Street Academies have also continued their work well into the 21st century. Now known as Communities in Schools, Inc., the Academies have garnered national distinction.⁵

Like Spelman alumnae Virginia Davis Floyd and Darnell Ivory, today’s Spelman students “enter to learn and exit to serve.”⁶ They are encouraged by the College mission and related programs not only to volunteer, but also to see themselves as women who can promote social change through their life-long involvement with local and global communities. Spelman College’s commitment to developing student leaders who engage in service to “change the world” presents an institutional context quite different from those described in some service-learning scholarship.

According to Bickford and Reynolds’ survey of service-learning practitioners in “Activism and Service-Learning: Reframing Volunteerism As Acts of Dissent,” students rarely connect their service with activism, that is, comprehend and “seek to change the social climate and structures that make volunteerism necessary” (238). They explain, “few students understand their service as a contribution to structural social change” (238), because “the process of institutionalization obscures...the activist potential of service-learning.” In other words, in their efforts to get students involved in community service, institutions often overemphasize “the volunteer ethos, a philanthropic or charitable viewpoint that ignores the structural reasons to help others” (230); thus, students learn to value service, but they may miss the possible connections between service and activism. Paula Mathieu and Bruce Herzberg make similar observations.

5 The Atlanta Postal Street Academies became Exodus, Inc. in 1972, under the leadership of Neil Shorthouse, Bill Milliken and David Lewis. In 1977, Cities in Schools, Inc. “was created to manage [the academies’] national expansion.” By 1989, “the program thrived nationally” and changed its name once more to Communities in Schools, Inc. In 2007, Cities in Schools of Atlanta formed a new partnership with Atlanta Public Schools (“History,” *Communities in Schools of Atlanta*).

6 “Enter to learn and exit to serve” is the Office of Community Service and Student Development slogan.



In *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*, Paula Mathieu argues that some institutional approaches to sustaining service learning, like “repeat[ing] service projects” and using the academic calendar to determine a year in advance the type of service projects available to students (99), unwittingly fall short of the mark. While institutionalized service-learning has its benefits, such as “measurable success, broad institutional presence, and sustainability” (98), Mathieu argues that “today’s colleges and universities” tend to prefer “long-term, top-down, institutionalized service-learning programs” (96) that, by virtue of institutional agendas and protocols, may exchange authentic opportunities “to respond to communities’ needs and ideas” (98) for “benign,” prescribed service “task[s]” (99).

Considering how students interpret their service, Bruce Herzberg, in “Community Service and Critical Teaching,” questions what service-learning teaches students “about the nature of the problems that cause [community] organizations to come into existence” (138). Quoting Susan Stroud, he argues that community service projects, even in the context of a course, promote charity, not social change, if they are “‘not structured to raise the issues that result in critical analysis’” of social problems (139). Indeed, if the goal of service-learning is to promote social change, then instructors and institutions must have structures in place that help students critique the specific social problems that create community needs. Peck et al. also suggest that students may need assistance understanding both their agentive potential and the process of social change.

In their description of the Pittsburgh Community Literacy Center⁷—“a community/university collaborative between the Community House and The National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy at Carnegie Mellon” (200), Peck et al. identify “social change” as one of the key aims of “community literacy” (205). Community literacy—“literate acts

7 For more on the Pittsburgh Community Literacy Center, see Flower’s (2008) *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*.



that could yoke community action with intercultural education, strategic thinking and problem solving, and with observation-based research and theory building” (200)—encourages students to use writing as a tool for producing social change with real “personal and public consequences” (208). However, Peck et al. caution against “assum[ing] that teenagers come prepared to enter such a discourse, to move from complaint or assertion to strategic, savvy action, to understand how the slow wheels of public persuasion work, to value persistence, or even to believe in the power of their own voice or see that writing can make a difference” (208). This caveat alludes to the need for pedagogical strategies that help students develop their rhetorical skills, their awareness of social change processes, and a vision of themselves as social change agents.

Whereas scholars report a disconnect between students’ commitment (and/or that of colleges and universities) to volunteerism and their awareness of the larger structural issues underscoring the need for activism, Spelman’s positioning of students as change agents works to align service with activism. This article discusses “found” literacy partnerships—collaborations around literacy practices that emerge unexpectedly when Spelman College students enact the spirit of service and activism that has defined this historically black liberal arts college for women since its beginning. Through these partnerships, we see students in the process of becoming civic-minded women who use their literacies to promote “positive social change” (*History and Traditions* 1).

“A Choice to Change the World”: Institutional Identity and Community Service

From its mission and grounds to its traditions and curriculum, Spelman College instills in its students the mantra of change. Students learn from the College mission statement that they will become leaders who make the choice to change the world.

An outstanding historically Black college for women, Spelman promotes academic excellence in the liberal arts and develops the intellectual, ethical and leadership potential of its students. Spelman seeks to empower the total person, who appreciates the many cultures of the world and commits to positive social change. (*History and Traditions 1*)



Students also see the message of change displayed prominently on the drive leading up to Spelman’s front gates and on campus walkways. Banners juxtaposing the triumphant faces of Spelman students and faculty with the slogan “A Choice to Change the World” remind students that to attend Spelman is to make the choice to be an agent of change. Upon entering the gates, students see banners along walkways asserting, “Change Means Action,” “Change Means Strength,” “Change Means Growth,” “Change Means Success,” and “Change Means Service.”⁸ The Spelman College Glee Club often performs the song “A Choice to Change the World” during annual Founder’s Day celebrations and Commencement exercises. Written by Sara Stephens, C’ 2007 and arranged by both Dr. Kevin Johnson, Director of the Spelman College Glee Club, and Sara Stephens, the stirring song exhorts Spelman’s daughters to choose activism:

8 The banners are part of The Campaign for Spelman College. See <http://www.changemeansaction.com/index.php>



A Choice to Change the World⁹

Chorus

It's my choice
And I choose to change the world
It's my voice
And I'll speak with pride and
courage
I'll be the change I wanna see
I'll scream out loud and say
It's my choice
And I choose to change the world

Verse Two

Within this institution
We are women of change
The shoulders that we stand upon
Never received applause or fame
But in their honor I will live
Each day better than before
And show just how it takes a choice
To change yourself and so much
more

Verse One

Why put off for tomorrow
What I can do today
Why wait for another
When I can pave the way
No matter how young or old
I hold the power of change
Rather large or small, few or all
My choice remains the same

Bridge

The change begins today
With every choice that I make
Spelman look around and see
Where the changes need to be
End poverty
Fighting overseas
Another dies from a disease
End hypocrisy
Starving on the streets
And no one does a single thing

In its many iterations, the call for Spelman students to change the world speaks to systemic change that may begin with a single encounter, a community service experience, but ultimately aims to impact underlying structures. This kind of change is unlikely to occur within a semester or

⁹ The complete lyrics of “A Choice to Change the World” are available in “Spelman Blends Old and New Voices to Change the World.” See Works Cited.



even a year. As the Summerhill tutors recognized, theirs would need to be an “on-going” program, “continu[ing]...as long as the need exists” (Peters 34). It is this awareness of social change as a process and a long-term commitment that I see in Spelman’s rhetoric of change and its infusion in first-year student experiences. Chief among these is the First-Year Experience Seminar.

First-Year Experience Seminar (FYE) is a two-semester general education requirement that “exposes students to the tenets of academic excellence, leadership and service, which are the cornerstones of Spelman College.” As the common course syllabus informs students, the 2009-2010 FYE Seminar took part of its title, “‘When and Where I Enter’: Becoming a Free Thinking Spelman Woman,” and its inspiration from “Paula Giddings’s (1984) seminal book on African American women’s socio-political activism amidst severe racial and gender inequality.” Seminar activities, which include Convocations/Assemblies, class discussions, reflection essays, community service, and the First-Year Writing Portfolio, “[encourage] students to think critically about ‘when and where [they] enter’ as ethical leaders and agents of social change” (syllabus 1).

One Seminar objective, “attain practical experience as change agents” (syllabus 3), is best reflected in the community service requirement and reflection essay. With the assistance of the Bonner Office of Community Service and Student Development, students “identify at least one local community service agency, program or activity that reflects her social change interests” (3). Minimally, first-year students make an eight-hour commitment to the selected agency and, upon completion of those hours, reflect upon their experience. A key part of the reflection process is composing the Community Service Reflection essay. Students receive the following instructions:



As you know, your community service during the first year constitutes an important source of discovery and self-evaluation. Your interactions with the organization you chose constitute important moments for examining the values of the community and your own personal goals and values.

Compose a reflective essay about your community service experience this year and the new understandings you have derived from it. Include an assessment of the mission of the agency where you volunteered, how your service helped to fulfill the agency's mission, what you hoped to learn from the experience (from your Community Learning Agreement), and the extent to which your learning goals were achieved. Also, describe your current understanding of how social change occurs, using your agency's work as an example, if you choose. Finally, if you were directing the agency, describe how you might improve the way it functions. Examine the actions you would take as such a leader—and how those actions relate to your experience and observation.

You will be evaluated on your ability to analyze your experience and present specifics about your own goals and the potential achievements of the agency you worked for. At the same time, good critical thinking and writing depend upon a clear, direct, and concrete use of language.¹⁰

The community service requirement and reflection, which are repeated in the Sophomore Experience Seminar, illustrate the College's commitment to developing student leaders who serve as part of an activist agenda. Students choose a community agency that reflects their own social interests. They assess the agency's mission, thinking critically about how their contributions advanced that mission. They articulate the relationship between their personal goals and values and the agency's mission. Significantly, they reflect on the process of social change and what they might do if they were the agency director.

¹⁰ Obtained from the "FYE SpEl.Folio Assignments 2010-2011" webpage (see Works Cited), this FYE Community Service Reflection description is the same one used in the 2009-2010 FYE Seminar.



FYE Community Service reflections make visible students' thoughts on becoming change agents, their contemplations of shifting identity and expanding conceptions of service. As the three cases presented here illustrate, students are at different stages of understanding the relationship between activism and their "found" literacy partnerships—unexpected ways that the students used their literacies to support the mission of community agencies.

"Found" Literacy Partnerships: Making the Activist Connection

Erica and the Auburn Avenue Research Library

Erica's¹¹ reflection essay describes her service with the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History (AARL). The AARL is the first public library in the Southeast to provide specialized reference and research, archives and programs about African American culture and history ("Auburn Avenue Research Library"). Previously unfamiliar with the AARL and its mission, Erica chose this site for its commitment to addressing social issues. She explains,

The act of conducting community service is not just merely cleaning up the community, but one must assess the issues affecting their society. After reflecting on the issues affecting my society, I was in search of an opportunity that addressed the problems facing the community and also the problems facing the African American community as well.

Erica's reasons for choosing AARL suggest a greater motivation than just performing community service. Her willingness to serve is connected to her burgeoning awareness of her own activist potential. Rather than being disconnected from the "structural reasons to help others" (Bickford and Reynolds 230), Erica recognizes that service begins with identification of social problems in one's communities.

11 All student names are pseudonyms. Portions of the students' 2009-2010 FYE Community Service Reflections are referenced with their permission.



Erica worked with the AARL's 2010 Ashley Bryan Children's Literary Festival, an event co-sponsored by the National Black Arts Festival. She reports that "children, parents, caregivers, educators and others" participated in the three-day event, which "celebrat[ed] the sensitive and authentic representation of the African Diaspora in the genre of children's and young adult literature." According to Erica, organizers hoped the Festival would "promote literacy in the African American community by providing the children with characters in the literary works that they could relate to." Erica considered this goal laudable for several reasons. She observes, "These children were from all walks of life and vast socio-economic backgrounds. Many [people] may not know that racial and class disparities contribute to the success a child has with literacy." She also notes that "[she] was never awarded the opportunity to engage in literary works that focused on the African Diaspora until [she] came to Spelman College."

Erica's recognition that one's acquisition of literacy skills is influenced by socio-cultural and economic factors, like race and class, reflects her awareness of some of the social problems that give AARL purpose. As Erica noted, even though the "children [at the Festival] were from all walks of life" and some of them may "read under grade level," they shared in "common" a "passion for literacy and [their] race." What they seemed to lack, as she had at their age, is opportunities to engage literature and other works that celebrate African heritage.

Although Erica was told that she would be "registering participants, welcoming and greeting guests, handing out flyers, and directing guests to workshops," she was pleased to find occasions to "become more involved with the children." It was during these unexpected encounters that she used her academic literacies in support of the Festival's aims. She reflects,

I met many young girls and I was able to discuss and analyze literary works with them that focused on African American women in



society. One of the works we discussed was a documentary entitled, *A Girl Like Me*, by filmmaker Kiri Davis. This film explored the standards of beauty imposed on today's black girls and how these standards affect their self-image. I was able to explain to these young girls the [concept] of intersectionality and how it was a form of oppression that stemmed from slavery days and still has a negative effect on black women today. Although my duties were clearly set upon my arrival at the library, I met many young girls who I was able to mentor...

Erica credits her African Diaspora and the World¹² course for enabling her to speak knowledgeably about transatlantic slavery and its effects on black women and how such knowledge could empower the children to “make a positive contribution on the world and leave a legacy.” Erica sees herself as accomplishing this same goal with the Festival participants. Reflecting upon the impact of her service, she writes,

I was able to exercise my creativity to express to the young girls the importance of learning about black women in history and how they combated issues because these issues are ongoing. My demonstration to these young girls expressed my compassion for the problems facing the African American community such as literacy in our youth and the plight of black women. Giving back is a major part of community service and I was able to give encouragement to girls in my community to ensure that the[y] surpass the restrictions placed on them and reach their full potential.

Erica identifies the girls as belonging to “[her] community,” and therefore needing her to “give back” what she has received. Through “creativity” and “compassion,” Erica encourages the girls to do what Spelman is equipping her to do—“surpass the restrictions placed on [her] and reach [her] full potential.” The help that Erica provides are tools that the

12 African Diaspora and the World is a two-semester general education requirement that engages students in reading and writing about the African Diaspora.



girls can use to resist institutional racism and sexism, societal forces that threaten to deny the girls agency. Having the tools to resist such forces positions the girls to take part in creating structural changes.

While Erica is still discovering her activist potential, her service experience with the AARL has done much to shape her emerging awareness of how social change occurs. Evaluating the AARL's effectiveness, she posits,

Social change arises when an advocating individual realizes there is a problem affecting the community at an epidemic rate and takes the initiative to promote change. This event served as a catalyst to support literacy and growth of cultural competencies in the African American community. The work that this organization does truly denotes social change. Their objective is to make African American children aware at an early age [of] their historical background so they too can empower the world around them. Instilling these notions in children at a young age provide[s] them with a greater understanding of the social and cultural impact of people of color in today's literature and the world.

To Erica, social change is achievable when individuals recognize social problems and choose to act. An individual act or event, like the AARL's literary festival, can be just the "catalyst" needed to initiate a change process. Beyond helping the participants, the Festival, as Erica sees it, promotes knowledge of African American history and literature so that the children can one day "empower the world around them."

Sidney and the Atlanta University Center Neighborhood Association

Sidney's reflection essay describes her service with the Atlanta University Center Neighborhood Association (AUCNA). According to Sidney, the AUCNA focuses on community improvement by addressing a broad range of social issues. As an aspiring teacher and counselor, Sidney was drawn to the AUCNA's mentoring and tutoring program for middle school students. She reflects, "The mentoring motto of 'providing



leadership in representing the interest of the Atlanta University Center Neighborhood Association to the City of Atlanta and the community at large' lured me unto this project, and I was motivated to go about leading and helping students reach their highest potential."

As a mentor, Sidney identified "patience, the ability to reason, humor and discipline" as essential for success. She credits these qualities for enabling her to be "very interactive" with her mentees and to "assist" them with completing homework. During one tutoring session, Sidney found that assistance could be reciprocal. Rather than positioning herself as the expert and therefore the only one capable of making a contribution, she was open to learning from her young mentee. She writes, "I helped my mentee with his Harlem Renaissance project. I also learned a lot from him in using computers. He taught me how to explore the internet in a more effective way, while I helped him with his writing and citing skills."

Sidney notes that the student's self-motivation and "ambition to get things right" grew after this encounter, remind[ing] [her] of how [she] used to be as a middle school student." "Enlighten[ed]" by this found literacy partnership, Sidney decided that "exact day" that she would "always come back to help." She explains, "I became attached in a sense, being that I didn't want to leave this student. His capabilities reminded me of how I use to be as a child and this experience left me with a feeling of happiness because I understood that I had something to offer."

Although Sidney initially seems to focus solely on volunteerism, her service experience and subsequent realization that she could make a meaningful contribution through service played an integral role in her coming to see herself as "an agent of social change." She reflects,

Before starting at AUCNA, I understood social change to be a big movement, something that many people worked tirelessly to create to make lives better for many people. What I learned from working



at AUCNA is that social change can be as small as picking up trash, taking an elderly neighbor's dog for a walk, or even working with local programs to tutor youth. My experience has changed my perception of social change as a big movement. Now, I understand it as many people doing what is possible in order to make their communities decent places to live and learn. I now see myself as an agent of social change as I have, as Spelman's logo attests, made "a Choice to Change the World."

Sidney's recognition that her service is a form of activism illustrates what Bickford and Reynolds wish more students understood. They contend,

Many of our students appear to recognize activism only as participating in huge events planned by global or national organizations: marches, rallies and the like. They imagine activists as heroes, courageous and dedicated in ways that seem impossible to emulate. They do not recognize grassroots efforts as activism, and they do not see themselves as potential actors in either local or larger arenas. (238)

On the contrary, Sidney recognizes herself and her mentee as engaged in acts of social change in a local arena. Having made the connection between her service and activism, Sidney is more likely to continue seeing herself as someone who can make a difference because she does indeed "have something to offer."

Imagining the difference that she could make as the agency director, Sidney recommends greater disclosure of the agency's programs and greater visibility of the agency leader.

After serving at the AUCNA, I can say that I have gained a greater understanding about what it means to be a mentor and how being one makes me an agent of progressive social change. I wish, however, that the agency would have provided us with more information



about the other services that they provide for the community. If I were the leader of this agency, I would provide an introductory course for all volunteers so that they could see the functions of the facility and how all of the programs work together to help the community. I think that showing all volunteers the basic functions of all of the programs may boost participation because volunteers would be able to tell their friends about their volunteer experiences and other opportunities that the AUCNA offers. I wanted to meet the leader of the organization as well and to see him or her working in some capacity on the volunteer level. I know that the leader has many administrative duties to attend to, but I think that when volunteers see a leader working amongst them, it raises the respect and shows that the work is important to the agency as well. I think that these two things, having a feel for other volunteer opportunities and actually seeing the leader, would have enhanced my volunteer experience and my observations as a whole.

When the focus is only on volunteering, perhaps it is enough to serve where one is assigned. However, as an activist in the making, Sidney is not satisfied with serving blindly. She wants to know all of her options and understand how the AUCNA's many community initiatives work together to meet community needs. Additionally, her interest in the leader's visibility suggests concern for volunteer morale, which influences the sustainability of programs. Sidney's call for understanding the role of all AUCNA programs and concern for volunteers is linked to the need for structural changes. Pushing the boundaries of a volunteer rhetoric, Sidney's observation suggests that students need to be made aware of the larger structural issues undergirding service efforts and how certain programs help to address those issues.



Mya and Friday Night Live

Mya's reflection essay describes her service with Friday Night Live (FNL)—a prevention program that aims to reduce the rate of teen driving deaths by discouraging drinking and smoking while driving. According to Mya, FNL began in 1984 as a pilot program. Proving successful, FNL gained its first statewide office in 1988. By 1990, "there were a lot of schools that held the program." FNL's motto is, "Remember there is no such thing as a small act of kindness. Every act creates a ripple with no logical end." Mya believes that this motto reflects "the good Friday Night Live does to help give students knowledge that will be useful to them in the future."

To promote FNL's mission, Mya and other volunteers created "Buckle Up." Mya explains, "Buckle Up was a project that we came up with to help educate children on why it is important to buckle up their seat belts." After interviewing children about their car safety habits, searching the Internet for resources, and adapting factual information so that "children [could] understand" it, Mya and other volunteers created posters and pamphlets that they later used in presentations to elementary and middle school students.

Prior to serving with FNL, Mya "did not know any facts about teenage driving." She was "inspired" by how much she learned, not only about teen driving, but also about collaborating with others. Mya reflects, "I also learned that it takes a lot of work to come up with ideas when being in a group with other students. I feel like I learned a lot about myself while doing this project. This project made me have a drive to do anything I put my mind to."

Mya's literacy partnership is what Thomas Deans calls "writing-*for*-the-community." In "English Studies and Public Service," an excerpt from his book *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*, Deans distinguishes three types of community writing performed in a range



of service-learning programs and courses: “writing-*for*-the-community,” “writing-*about*-the-community,” and “writing-*with*-the-community” (108-110). When students write *for* the community, they work collaboratively with the community agency to produce documents that advance the community’s mission. Often rooted in the nonprofit agency, these learning sites tend to privilege “academic and workplace literacies” (110). When writing *about* the community, students produce essays based upon their “lived experience” through “traditional community service” (108). Since the classroom is usually the primary learning site, “academic and critical literacies” are privileged (110). When students write *with* the community, they work “directly with community members (rather than through established nonprofit or governmental agencies) to research and address pressing local problems” (110). Typically anchored in community centers, these learning sites privilege “academic, community, and hybrid literacies” (110).

Mya sees her writing-*for*-the-community as performing a service, but, unlike Erica and Sidney, she does not explicitly connect her service with activism. Instead, she articulates values consistent with the agency’s motto and a volunteer ethos.

To me, community service means helping not only your community, but also your school, state, and country. It means to be kind and caring toward others, to help out those who are less fortunate. Community service is what drives a person to take time out of their day to better their community and ultimately themselves. It will also better people not only physically, but mentally while improving your surroundings.

Mya recognizes a connection between her local service and the welfare of her “school, state, and country,” but she does not yet understand (or articulate) her service as connected to an activist agenda. At this stage of becoming, she acknowledges ethical reasons for serving—kindness and caring—as well as some personal benefits, such as how one can improve



“physically” and “mentally” while working to “better their community.” Mya later notes that “being involved and helping organizations fulfill their goals makes [her] feel good as a person.”

Mya’s one reference to social change comes when she considers what she might do as the agency leader. She writes, “Social change that I would take action on is having a mandatory class that is dedicated to learning about teen driving. I would have a video and talk to elementary and middle school students about safe teen driving so that they can be prepared for when it is [their] time to start driving.” Even though she does not yet connect policy change with activism, Mya is recommending a change of policy that would require young students to learn about teen driving safety before they are of age to drive. Besides this brief mention, Mya focuses on service as an act of benevolence.

Literacy, Service, and Activism: What Taking Up the Rhetoric Means

Between participating in a literacy partnership and reflecting in writing on the experience, Erica, Sidney and Mya performed multiple literate acts. Erica participated in an African American literary festival and found that she could use her knowledge of literary analysis and the African Diaspora to promote literacy. Sidney mentored and tutored middle school children to improve academic achievement and found in the process that she gained computer literacy. Mya found herself working in a group to conceive, develop and present an original project that required the production of several literate texts. These performances are significant first steps in the process of becoming civic-minded women who use their literacies to promote social change. As we see in their written reflections, the students’ emerging awareness of their activist potential is at different stages of development.

Erica’s reflection indicates some awareness of the larger structural issues influencing the AUCNA’s mission and the need for an African



American literary children's festival. She is also able to articulate an understanding of how social change occurs, aligning herself with "advocating individuals" who recognize a need and act on it. Sidney's reflection does not acknowledge structural reasons that make her service necessary, but, like Erica, she has an epiphany about social change. No longer seeing it as a big movement, she recognizes that she can be one of many individuals who make a difference. Mya, on the other hand, represents a counter example. She neither mentions larger structural issues related to teen driving deaths, nor makes clear an understanding of social change processes. Whether Mya did not understand social change as well as the others or simply did not address the reflection prompt carefully is indeterminable from the reflection alone. Even so, these differences raise the question of what is gained when students take up the rhetoric of social change, when they begin to articulate an understanding of the connection between service and activism and even assert an activist identity?

Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky's learning theory is instructive in this regard. Vygotsky explains that children reach higher developmental levels by learning from more knowledgeable others. "The more skilled adult" gives the child activities "slightly" above her current level of development to help her mature. Adults help children bridge the gap between where they are and a higher level of development "by means of prompts, clues, modeling, explanation, leading questions, discussion, joint participation, encouragement..." (Miller 379-380). Vygotsky called this gap, or the "distance" between developmental levels, the zone of proximal development.

The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state. (380, Vygotsky qtd. in Miller)



The FYE community service requirement and reflection are activities that faculty use to bridge the gap between students' current understandings of service as simply the ethical or moral thing to do and service also as a tool for social change. By presenting students with the message of change and activism, Spelman College endeavors to help students develop activist sensibilities, including awareness of the structural reasons for volunteering and a sustained commitment to promoting social change.

Thus, while faculty should not assume that students become activists after one service experience, even if students mistakenly assume so, and faculty must acknowledge that students sometimes write what they think faculty want them to, taking up activist language is a significant performance in the process of becoming. As students have more service experiences and explore social problems, ideally in the context of service-learning courses, their understanding of the possible link between service and activism will continue to mature. Like Mya, it may take some students more time than others to articulate a connection between their service and activism; however, given multiple opportunities for engaging social problems and practicing activist discourses, students will have the tools needed to make the choice to change the world.



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