

The Role of Narrative in Student Engagement

**Sarah Hardison
O'Connor,**
*James Madison
University*

*Since I began teaching a course titled *Writing in the Community*, I have been fascinated with how narratives deepen students' service-learning experiences. In their article "Narrative Learning in Adulthood," M. Carolyn Clark and Marsha Rossiter say that stories "draw us into an experience at more than a cognitive level; they engage our spirit, our imagination, our heart, and this engagement is complex and holistic." Narratives give broader context to students' service, foster critical consciousness, help students believe they can make a contribution in their own communities, and contribute to making service-learning a transformative experience, all outcomes that remind us of the importance of the humanities in forming active citizens.*

You could say my teaching career began in the leisurely nights spent as a child listening to my mother or father reading. The rise and fall of their voices as they read first nursery rhymes and Dr. Seuss, then much later *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *The Mysterious Island*, instructed me in the rhythm of language and the love of story. Eventually, I followed those internalized voices

to an MFA in Creative Writing program and began teaching fiction and poetry writing courses as an adjunct in the English Department of the nearby university. I left that for a full-time job as editor of a magazine; when I returned to teaching seven years later, it was to take a teaching job in a rhetoric and composition department.

The love of story came with me but not until I developed a “Writing in the Community” class did I see the way that story—narrative—could provide critical context for experiential learning. I had not expected students to respond so powerfully. At its most basic, narrative is an account of an actual or fictional event or sequence of events. In this class, the reading and writing of narrative deepened students’ service-learning experiences, helping them move from simply fulfilling a requirement to becoming passionate, engaged members of the community.

Those of us working in the humanities can’t fail to notice that students are increasingly being guided toward STEM majors. Funding and institutional support tend to accrue to those majors as well. Arguing for the value of the humanities in his article “The Humanities and Citizenship,” Professor of Humanities at Brigham Young University George Handley said, “If the humanities matter at all, it is because they shape our imagination, and habits of mind in turn shape our actions” (55). My experience with this class is a reminder of the significant role the humanities can play in forming active citizens.

In 1994, Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, proposed a “New American College” connected to the community and committed to improving, in a very intentional way, the human condition. Many universities have since adopted engagement as part of their mission and promoted service-learning as a way for students to interact with their communities. My university is a good example. Its mission statement reads, “We are a community committed to preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives.” Just last year it added this vision statement: “To be the national model for the engaged university: engaged with ideas and the world.” Majors from engineering to education to communication now offer courses that require a certain number of service hours.

I created the Writing in the Community course in 2008. Rationale for this offering in our department of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication came from the push to give students the opportunity to put writing into practice in the community and from the principles of public rhetoric, i.e. writing to effect change (Couture and Kent, 2004). In designing it, I tried to utilize a critical service-learning approach. Service-learning is generally understood as community service that is tied to classroom learning goals (Jacoby, 1996). Extensive research supports the idea that service-learning can be transformative for students, helping them acquire everything from empathy and leadership skills to higher grade point averages (Astin & Sax, 1998), but critics have challenged the idea that all service-learning is equally valuable (Neururer & Rhoads, 1998, 329).

Traditional service-learning emphasizes person-to-person service to address problems. Rice and Pollack (2000) and Rosenberger (2000) describe critical service-learning as academic service-learning with a social justice orientation. Yan Wang at Milwaukee Area Technical College and Robert Rodgers at Ohio State University conducted a study in 2006 that showed that “service-learning courses in general had a positive impact on students’ cognitive development, while service-learning courses with a social justice emphasis appeared to have more impact on students’ cognitive development than those without a social justice emphasis” (2006). Tania Mitchell, the service-learning director for the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University explains,

While individual change and student development are desired outcomes of traditional and critical service-learning, critical service-learning pedagogy balances the student outcomes with an emphasis on social change. This requires rethinking the types of service activities in which students are engaged, as well as organizing projects and assignments that challenge students to investigate and understand the root causes of social problems and the courses of action necessary to challenge and change the structures that perpetuate these problems (Mitchell 2008, 53).

The basic framework of Writing in the Community is 20 hours of community service, texts by or about leaders of social change, a

student-led seminar, a writing project for the community partner, weekly short writing assignments, and a final personal narrative paper in which students put the pieces of the course together for themselves to articulate their meaning.

One of the first tasks in *Writing in the Community* is to choose community service sites. Our town, Harrisonburg, VA, has a population of 52,000 with especially large Hispanic and Mennonite communities. It is a designated refugee resettlement site due to the availability of jobs in the poultry industry, so it also has growing Iraqi and North African populations. Students in the public schools represent 47 countries of birth and speak at least 48 languages, everything from Arabic to Tigrinya (Enrollment Statistics, 2016). The poverty rate, excluding university students, is 15% (Juday 2016), whereas the state average is 11.8% (State 2010-2014). As the county seat, the city provides many services to residents, so students in the class have over 100 community partners from which to choose. They have volunteered at the local animal shelter, the Children's Museum, the homeless shelter, a free legal aid organization, the elementary schools, and many others. They choose their sites for a variety of reasons.

One student, Alexa, who volunteered at the Bridgewater Retirement Facility, wrote:

Last Christmas Eve, my grandfather lost his battle with congestive heart failure. It was probably the hardest thing I've experienced thus far, and I'm still dealing with it everyday....

I spent the majority of my winter break at hospitals, nursing homes, and ultimately funeral services. I suppose I wanted to work at a retirement community to connect with active senior citizens. It would be a way for me to forget how his sickness changed him and remember how active and energetic he once was.

Community service is the backdrop for the reading and writing students do and acts as a unifying element throughout the course,

with students reporting regularly on their work through class discussions and written assignments.

Early on, the class discusses the meaning of community and what communities the students belong to. Most identify family or the university as their primary community. Few feel any sense of belonging to the Harrisonburg community, so the first assignment is a “community mapping” assignment. This involves going with a partner on a walking tour of downtown Harrisonburg, taking notes and photos, talking to people, and reporting back through a visual presentation for the class. This could be a slide show, a Prezi, a video, or some other means.

Students doing community service often have little knowledge of the local community where they will be doing their service. The goal of this assignment, then, is to get students learning more about Harrisonburg and identifying some of its strengths and weaknesses. The assignment asks them to observe the architecture, diversity, city services, green spaces, and outreach to students, on the assumption that the more they know about the city, the more they will want to be involved in it. In addition, this assignment helps students understand the connection between rhetoric and community, showing the way issues arise out of specific communities.

The readings for the class vary, but the most recent class used autobiographies of Gandhi and Martin Luther King (compiled from their own writings), *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* by Tracy Kidder, and *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich. We have also used *The Long Loneliness* by Dorothy Day and *Dead Man Walking* by Sr. Helen Prejean. These are all narratives by or about leaders of social change, utilizing the subjects’ own voices as much as possible, showing how leaders use rhetoric to effect change. Any number of other books could have been chosen. I chose to focus on an overview of community and social justice issues, but a course focusing more on local issues, for example, might choose readings or even collect narratives related to the history of the area. Recently, two JMU colleagues, Sean McCarthy from the School of Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication and Mollie Godfrey from the English Department, completed a year-long project with

their “Representing Black Harrisonburg” class celebrating the life of pioneering African American educator and former slave Lucy F. Simms and the school named after her.

The Simms School served African American students from all over Rockingham County, VA, from 1938 to 1965. Students spent spring of 2016 gathering archival material from libraries and family collections to create a permanent exhibition: “Celebrating Simms: The Story of the Lucy F. Simms School,” to be housed in the original school building. As part of their work, students also gathered narratives of community members who had attended the school. These narratives provided important context, serving as historical records but also bringing to life the issues of race, community, and social inequality at the heart of the exhibit. This course easily could have gone back further to include slave narratives or reached forward to include a book on Thurgood Marshall, who argued before the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregation was a violation of the 14th Amendment. The ruling in that case brought about the desegregation of schools like the Simms School, and Marshall went on to be named a Supreme Court justice.

Mitchell (2008) discusses the role of readings in service-learning:

Readings can often invoke voices or experiences not heard or realized in service, and raise questions and inspire dialogue that can lead to deeper understanding. The readings and concepts covered in a critical service-learning course should bring attention to issues of social justice and concepts of privilege and oppression (55).

The advantage of narratives is that they present issues as complex and multidimensional. They can be interpreted in a variety of ways, depending on a person’s own history. They are not prescriptions for practice but “material to think with” (Dyson, 2002), which makes them exceptional pedagogical tools. Narratives often help students grasp issues in the community in new ways. For example, after reading Barbara Ehrenreich’s description of living on minimum wage in the book *Nickel and Dimed*, Kerry, who volunteered at Second Home, an afterschool daycare center, wrote,

Nickel and Dime also brought my attention to the extreme poverty right here in Harrisonburg. One of the teachers told me a story about driving kids home from Second Home and feeding them because they had not eaten all day...Much of this financial struggle comes from the minimum wage jobs the parents hold that do not provide enough money to support a family. It is one thing to read about poverty and another to see it in the lives of the people right in your community. Reading *Nickel and Dime* has made me aware of the vastness of poverty in America.

Narratives are particularly effective in presenting students with alternate ways of seeing the world and their place in it. *Mountains Beyond Mountains* contains a scene where Dr. Paul Farmer sees a fellow doctor getting ready to return to the U.S. from Haiti: “But aren’t you worried about not being able to forget all this? There’s so much disease here.”

“No,” the doctor said. “I’m an American, and I’m going home” (2004, 80). Farmer realizes that although he is American also, he has had a fundamental shift in the way he views himself. After living with and being involved in the struggles of the Haitian people, he no longer sees himself primarily as an American but rather as a human being. This seemingly subtle change has radical implications. The community we identify with is the community we feel responsible for. This passage is one of many that make students think about how they identify themselves. Meghan wrote,

When I signed up for my community service with refugee resettlement, the volunteer application had two options: student or community member. I remember thinking, “Why can’t I be both?” And throughout the semester, this class has taught me that it is indeed possible to be both.

Narratives pose sometimes uncomfortable challenges to long held opinions, for example, belief in the fairness of the criminal justice system or the amount of progress in race relations. They open up inquiries about social issues; power dynamics; and cultural constructions of race, gender, and sexual orientation. By raising questions, the texts act as catalysts for students’ own evolving

narratives and impact the way they view the community at all levels, from local to global. Reflecting back on one of the texts, Katie, for example, exhibited a shift from concrete thinking in black and white terms to understanding the complexities involved in justice and truth when she wrote:

Dead Man Walking sparked many emotions and led to some heated debates over the course of a few class periods. Initially, I think each one of us had some sort of opinion on the death penalty. By the time we finished the book, many of us, including myself, felt like we couldn't take a firm stance. For me, this was one of the first times in my life that I had been so outwardly challenged in my own beliefs. I had always been a proponent of the death penalty, but after reading this book, I can definitely see the other side of the argument.

It is the stories of the inmates in *Dead Man Walking* that shake students to their core. "Human beings are the creatures who tell stories," say M. Carolyn Clark and Marsha Rossiter in their article "Narrative Learning in Adulthood" (2008, 61). Storytelling is an integral part of being human. In the classroom, stories make learning more interesting and engage students on a spiritual and emotional as well as intellectual level. In her 2015 British Library lecture "On Liberty, Reading and Dissent," lawyer Shami Chakrabarti said, "As a recovering lawyer, I have always known the power of great storytelling, whether of the factual or non-factual variety, of truth-telling in moving people, sometimes more profoundly, than mainstream politics or even the law."

In the movie *Motorcycle Diaries*, which students watch during the semester, two young medical students, Che and Alberto, take a transformative motorcycle trip from one end of South America to the other (Salles, 2004). A turning point for the protagonists is when they begin meeting South Americans from different countries and hearing their stories. "I felt the world changing," Che remarked, "or was it us?" At the end of the movie, the protagonist swims across a river that divides a leper colony from the rest of the town, symbolizing his crossing of social and economic boundaries. Narratives help us care about other lives, feel solidarity, and develop empathy.

Without the backdrop of the narratives, community service can be simply an assignment to dispatch as painlessly as possible. Narratives help students make connections to broader legal and ethical frameworks, say Audrey Osler and Juanjuan Zhu in their article examining the role of individual and collective narratives throughout history in struggles for justice (2010). A student who volunteered at the Harrisonburg Free Clinic, for example, was introduced by Paul Farmer in *Mountains Beyond Mountains* to the idea that health care is a basic human right. This led to an examination of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and an understanding of how local issues are connected to global issues.

It is important for people to experience life as a continuum with a past and a future. Narratives help students do that (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Reading about the lives of others, they can view themselves in a historical context. The struggle for equal treatment under the law carried on by Gandhi in India is not so dissimilar from the struggle for equal treatment carried on by members of the LGBT community or the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States today. Prisoners that Sr. Helen Prejean meets with on death row have some of the same issues as prisoners in the local jail. And if the service students are doing sometimes seems insignificant or tedious, it can achieve significance by association with a larger idea. They are not just working in a food pantry, for example. They are working to combat one of the three major problems in the world according to Martin Luther King: poverty, racism and violence. A student named Sara wrote:

This feeling of wanting to make some impression on the world after learning about figures such as Dr. Farmer and Sister Prejean is what made service so vital to this course. I enjoyed my volunteer work that I did with the Special Olympics, and definitely learned many things from the experience. All of the people we have read about started their journey by serving their community, whether it was accidental with a set purpose. To me, this shows the vast importance of providing service in any way possible. I believe that it is most definitely a joint relationship in that both parties learn from each other, which we have discussed in class together. I also volunteered in a fifth grade classroom for a day, which was

a great experience. The entire class was Hispanic, with a couple students barely knowing English, and the school is in a low-income area. The teacher came into the year knowing very little Spanish, and it was also her first year of teaching, which proved to be obstacles for her as well as the students. However, I saw that she embraced their differences, and there was so much learning going on for both her and the students that far exceeded what you can learn in a textbook. This was great to see for me since I am an education major. Furthermore, the situation reminded me of Dr. Farmer and Greg Mortenson's experiences of providing education while interacting with a different culture.

Narrative can go even further than providing context. It can take students beyond understanding to action. Osler and Zhu (2011) say,

In adopting narrative as a pedagogical tool, we are inviting teachers and students to make links between their experiences and those of strangers in distant places, including links between these strangers' struggles for justice and their own. Narratives, used in this way, can be used to advance justice and human rights through education. The links that students are able to make between their own struggles and those of the subject of the narrative not only support recognition of our common humanity, but also may inspire action for justice and human rights.

The writing students do are just as important as the readings. Throughout the semester, they compose weekly two-page writing assignments. Some are reading responses. These are purposely exploratory, opportunities for students to reflect on any aspects of the readings that strike them. A student last fall, Kerry, wrote,

The writing assignments made me reflect on the books and activities on a personal level and evaluate how they had impacted me... This made me more vigilant and proactive in being aware of how the readings and discussions affected me. It made me think. Not just about the correct answers for the quizzes but about the significance of what I was reading. Because I felt I had the freedom to connect my work in this course to myself personally, I became more open and willing to accept the ideas and thoughts

I was learning about. This is what made my journey in the class so different from any other class.

Other writing assignments ask students to imagine a day in the life of someone at their service sites, compose a letter to a death row inmate (they can choose whether or not to mail it), and take on a writing project *for* their community partner.

During the semester, without realizing it, students are composing their own narratives, revising or affirming their world views and personal philosophies. What kinds of people will they be? What do they believe? Value? Aspire to? The course does not try to tell students what they should get out of the readings, writing assignments, and service. The final paper asks them to make those connections for themselves; it asks them to put all the elements of the class together in a personal narrative that describes their class journey. Where did you start from and where have you arrived? What have you seen along the way? Where will this lead you?

The final papers frequently reveal a change in attitude from the beginning of the class to the end. This is directly connected to the narratives they have both read and composed. Noelle wrote:

My journey in this class has been so much different than I ever expected. Starting the semester, I assumed that it would be like most classes. I would read a few books, write a few papers, learn some good information, and move on. What I didn't expect to happen were the lasting changes it has made in me.

People use narrative to make sense of their experience. Transformative learning is the process of "restorying," changing one's story when the old one no longer makes sense (Kenyon & Randall, 1997). In describing what he learned in the class, Justin wrote in his final paper:

I will take what I have learned in this class and apply it to everyday scenarios for the rest of my life. I already find myself listening in when I hear someone mention capital punishment or the Civil Rights Movement. The rhetoric and writing I was

exposed to in this class will propel me into a world outside of reading BuzzFeed articles and school newspapers; I will insist on reading actual accounts and more conceptual information. Most importantly, I will act on social change. These books have given me the foundation to support my arguments and ideas to the point where I can show leadership. I have supported social change for quite some time now, and now I am committed to improving the world around me through writing, speaking, and demonstrating.

Through the combination of narrative and service-learning, this student has acquired a sense of agency and a conviction that his contribution is important. The value of this cannot be overstated. In a recent interview, journalist Bill Moyers spoke of the importance of the willingness to be involved in the democratic process:

Ninety-six percent of the [American] people believe it's "important" that we reduce the influence of money. Yet 91 percent think it's "not likely" that its influence will be lessened. Think about that: People know what's right to do yet don't think it can or will be done. When the public loses faith in democracy's ability to solve the problems it has created for itself, the game's almost over (Drier, 2014).

Are there any downsides to the use of narratives in a service-learning class? Certainly, there are pitfalls, as I have discovered. Leaders like Gandhi and King can make students think, "I can never be like them. They were exceptional." Or, "I can never hope to accomplish anything important. All I'm doing is visiting a nursing home once a week." Sarah started off feeling inadequate compared to the people she was reading about, but by the end of the class she had come up with her own idea:

I know that I will never be able to make the same impact as [the people we are reading about]. I know that I do not have the patience to visit with death row inmates, the knowledge to go to Haiti and build a clinic, or the courage to end racism. However, I wrote down this note about a month ago: My ultimate dream is to start a non-profit organization that distributes books to all children in need around the world. I want to combine my love of

reading with my passion for service. I know this will take a lot of hard work, but I will not give up.

Students can also become disillusioned when they discover that their heroes are actually human and imperfect. Gandhi had troubled family relationships. King had extramarital affairs. Does this invalidate their work? No. They were human. In fact, this can lead to useful discussions about things like the pitfalls of giving aid and creating dependency, the problems of paternalism in service, and the need to thoroughly investigate organizations before contributing to them. One semester we were in the middle of reading a book by Greg Mortensen when Jon Krakauer went on 60 Minutes to charge that Mortenson's nonprofit Central Asia Institute had been misusing funds and significant parts of his books were fabricated. I was embarrassed that I had assigned this book (parts of which had turned out to be fraudulent) and was afraid discovering this would undermine the whole class. Actually, it led to some of the best conversations of the semester and provided an important dose of reality. Not every good cause is what it appears. I brought in manila envelopes for students to send back their copies if they chose to do so with notes to the publisher. At the end of the semester, Katie wrote,

The importance of reputability and media coverage wouldn't have come up in discussion if it weren't for this scandal, and I think it would have been naïve of us, as educated individuals to have completed this course without addressing those issues.

Now I introduce every class to the website Charity Navigator, which provides information on how charities use funds.

In the end, why narrative and service-learning work together so well is mysterious and simple at the same time. After focusing on the overwhelming, impenetrable problems in the world in so many of their classes, students can be tempted to throw up their hands in despair and conclude that it is not worth trying to solve these problems. At a minimum, narratives show them concrete examples of people who have had the optimism and determination to tackle big problems. They do much more than that, though, and function as

valuable tools in fostering critical consciousness in a service-learning classroom.

Stories have always been a way for cultures to pass on values and identity. The stories we possess as a culture are a great richness that we owe it to our students to pass on. And then the classroom can offer them a safe space to reflect on those stories. At the end of his long journey in *Motorcycle Diaries*, Roberto said, "Something happened, something I have to think about for a long time... I'm not the same me I was" (Salles, 2004). Narrative helps make service-learning that kind of experience.

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Sarah Hardison O'Connor is a Professor in the School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She is the Co-Director of the Humanitarian Affairs minor there as well as the Co-Director of the JMU in LA program. Her research focuses on community engagement and the intersection of rhetoric and technology. She is currently the Faculty Associate in the Digital Learning Center at JMU and through a university grant is working with her Prison Writing course to produce the Second Chances podcast. This podcast features interviews with ex-offenders who are living in and making extraordinary contributions to their communities. The goal is to show through individual stories that people can change and that the incarcerated are human beings with enormous potential, too much potential to waste. O'Connor's work has been published in a variety of places, including *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Texas Review*, *Writing on the Edge*, *the International Journal of the Arts in Society*, *Commonweal*, and edited collections such as *Service Learning in the Composition Classroom* and the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' *Tough Times Companion*.