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Service-Learning Projects in Composition and Beyond

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SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS IN COMPOSITION AND BEYOND

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writing OUT OF BOUNDS

All college teachers want their courses to be relevant and provocative, and to encourage students to be more active learners of the discipline, participants in the academy, and citizens in the wider community. As teachers of composition, we first experimented with combining community service with classroom teaching because it promised to advance teaching aims we value, especially making connections between academic courses and community needs, and between cognitive thinking and ethical social action. And we continue with service-learning projects because our experience and students' responses suggest a significant degree of success in meeting those goals. But we are certainly not alone, as various community-based learning initiatives are under way across the disciplines, both at our university and nationwide.

Several years ago the provost at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst established a Special Committee on Community Service-Learning and awarded faculty grants to create new courses or redesign existing ones. The criteria for these annual, non-renewable, competitive grants require that (1) the courses integrate students' community service experience into course content; (2) the faculty develop the service component cooperatively with community agencies; (3) the students' service meet community needs; and (4) the courses require systematic reporting, reflection, and assessment by students about their community service. "Service-Learning Fellows" are also expected to continue teaching their courses for at least three years, with the goal of their becoming part of the department's regular curriculum.

Two sections of first-year College Writing, housed in the English department, were among the 1994 service-learning courses launched in art, consumer studies, education, nursing, philosophy, and public health. Those sections of College Writing continued and evolved during 1995-96, and ten new faculty, from anthropology, chemistry, communication, education (2), hotel, restaurant and travel, management, nursing, sports studies, and theater replaced the previous committee. We have taught our third year of College Writing with a service emphasis.

Our vision of service learning is grounded in modifying an existing first-year writing course, creating an upper-division seminar in Community Service Writing, and consulting with faculty from other colleges engaged in, or anticipating, similar projects.

[Designing the Course](#)

Our experience stems from combining a community service project with the academic work of a first-year composition class known as College Writing, or simply, 112. The aim of 112 is to help students "become better able to accomplish the writing [they] will be asked to do here at the University and in [their] life generally." The course is designed to assist students in composing essays in which they narrate, analyze, interpret, reflect, explain, argue, and research. We use a student-centered process approach to writing; students are asked to compose multiple drafts of each essay, and to revise with attention to development, organization, style, grammar, syntax, voice, and audience.

The course is taught as a relatively small (twenty-four student maximum) writer's workshop in which students work in peer response groups to assist one another with revising. Students also act as each other's audience, and final drafts of essays are published in class publications. Ordinarily, students write six essays during the semester, in addition to keeping a journal and compiling a final portfolio.

We first needed to define what kind of a project would fit the course goals. Local community agencies told us that they needed such publications as brochures, newsletters, articles, press releases, surveys, reports of those surveys, and in-house research. Because those projects would stimulate students to grapple with writing and rhetoric, we decided to connect students directly with agency contact people. Although writing for an agency is very different from writing for a college class, a service writing project, nevertheless, requires students to use the same strategies as they use for drafting essays. Attention to revision--especially regarding audience, purpose, editing, and design--is essential because the writing is for the practical use of the agency. Writing for an agency gives students a different perspective on writing and the "work" it must do in the world, and many students experience this as more compelling than writing for the classroom. Two of our former students explain as follows:

I have never before, when writing, spent much time considering who I am addressing and the best possible ways to do so. In the past, my formal writing has always been directed towards teachers. . . . But in my work for Franklin Youth Services, I am speaking to children and teenagers, their parents . . . local businesses whose help, support and funding the organization greatly benefits from . . . officials from our town and surrounding towns, who will use the brochures as public relations materials and ways of appropriating more town funding.

This project . . . gave us the opportunity to see what it is like to have to be responsible for a project with somebody that you can't make excuses to, or else you'll end up looking irresponsible and immature. We also experienced a different style of writing in that it was related to being more formal and business oriented. This writing wasn't any harder than essay writing but it was new for me and I'm glad I was exposed to it.

Once we had determined the appropriate kind of project, our next task was how to manage it. Because of the structure of the course, we were already teaching in a model that is centered on students and active learning. Substituting the service-writing project for two of the six mandatory essays would further develop the active nature of our classrooms. The first step to success is to start early. If there is some sort of Community Service Center on your campus, ask them to help you make contacts. We suggest contacting agencies at least a month before the beginning of the class and working with each agency to define two or three projects. We also suggest having students work in pairs. Once you have enough projects (for us, twenty students working in pairs means about ten projects at about five different agencies), students can choose them from a "menu." Our most recent menu included newsletter articles for the Alzheimer's Association and Big Brothers/Big Sisters, a volunteer handbook for the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, press releases on environmental clean-ups for the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group and on "lemon laws" for the Consumer Protection Division of the District Attorney's Office, and a fact sheet for survivors of rape for the university's Everywoman's Center.

The first time that we integrated community service into our courses, we made it mandatory because it fit squarely into course goals. We experienced some resistance to projects, which led to a few that were unsatisfactory. The following year we made the projects optional (as a substitute for two essays), which we thought would assure that the students would be motivated. For the third year, our sections of 112 were flagged as incorporating community service.

Because we teach on a fifteen-week semester, we introduce the project on the first day of class, and by the third week, we ask students to select a project and commit to it. Keeping track of many different students doing various projects can get overwhelming. We have students keep project logs that are interactive--we collect and comment in the logs on a weekly basis. In the log, we ask them to write about planning to begin the project, each contact and meeting with the agency, reflections on the process of writing the publication, and on their understanding of the issues involved in community service. We also hold at least two conferences during the semester to discuss the project and work in the class. Another way to keep track is to post a production schedule that shows all pairs of students and their progress through critical points of the project.

Working with an Agency

To prepare for the project, we have students investigate the agency. They need about four weeks to become familiar with the agency and its issues; each agency has its own culture, just as every academic discipline has its conventions and rhetorical strategies. For example, before taking on a project with an agency like the Alzheimer's Association, a student would need to understand the disease itself, the services the agency provides, how they work, and their particular needs. In addition, we provide students the opportunity to write about their personal connections to the agency--for example, the powerful experience of seeing a grandparent suffer from Alzheimer's.

Next, students collect publications from the agency and do a close reading. We provide the following questions to guide students as they write about the publication:

Publications

What Does the Organization Say about Itself in Print?

1. Read a publication (pamphlet or brochure) the organization produced.
2. Consider the specific words and phrases, photos and designs, and the layout and colors of the publication. Using what you see, answer the following prompts:
 - a. Describe the information in the publication: What is it about? Purpose of the publication? History of the agency? What does the agency do?
 - b. Describe how the information is organized (question, answer or ---).
 - c. Describe how the organization depicts itself (dedicated, caring, or ---).
 - d. Who does the organization help? How? Why?
 - e. Describe the audience for this publication (volunteers, students, ---).
 - f. Describe the tone and how it relates to the information (sad, invitational, ---).
 - g. How effective do you think this publication is?

Interviewing

In addition to analyzing the publication, we have students interview the agency person who will supervise their project, and then find a published article that addresses the issue with which the agency deals. We give the students a list of questions to aid them in understanding the article, and the following guide is given as they prepare to interview:

Time to get another perspective on the organization. Although you will be interviewing your contact person, consider for a moment who else you might want to interview: A client? Volunteer? Director? What different views will you get? Each person with a different role will have different information. List five questions. Also, check out the office. What's the tone? How does it look? What does the office say about the organization? What do the people in the office "say" with their attitudes, style, etc.? Also sketch an organizational chart of the agency. Who is accountable to whom? Which audiences will read and/or edit your project?

We often turn this series of assignments into a documented essay, which gives us the opportunity to teach important research and documentation skills that undergraduates certainly need; simultaneously, such essays provide essential contextual information for students' service projects.

After students have done the background work, they meet with the agency contact person, discuss the parameters of the project in detail, and write a community writing project agreement, which is signed by the student(s) and the agency representative. We usually teach students to write this document in memo form, so that as the project evolves, they practice new styles of writing and learn to communicate professionally and clearly with the agency. Students "cc:" us as well, so that we are aware of all communications with the agency.

For example, the Massachusetts Student Public Interest Group (MassPIRG), housed on campus, has ongoing needs for press releases and newsletter articles. One of our students recently wrote a news advisory entitled "MassPIRG to Host a Tire Clean-up" and followed this with a one-page press release for the local papers, "MassPIRG on a Roll Cleaning Up Tires." Similarly, the Hampshire Educational Collaborative (HEC), an agency that brings together local school districts to provide programs for learning and emotionally disabled elementary and secondary students, hoped to better recruit university students for internships. One pair of our college writers met with the HEC director and planned a desktop-published flyer to post around campus, and a one-page explanation of the internship for interested students. Those projects enabled MassPIRG and HEC to get the word out about their initiatives, and offered first-year students the opportunity to publish their writing beyond the limits of the classroom.

Once the project begins, we help students set deadlines for at least two drafts of the project. We provide time for instructor and peer response to these drafts before the agency sees them. If appropriate, we teach students (or have them teach each other) to use desktop publishing. When the project is completed, we send a form that guides agencies in evaluating it. We manage the project so that it is completed by the tenth week of classes, which leaves five more weeks to complete the class and some leeway for projects that need a bit more time. We recommend being as firm as is possible on all deadlines, but especially on completing the project with five weeks to spare. It is not useful for the student, professor, or agency to have a project rushed to dubious completion during finals week when so many other commitments are pressing.

Building Social Awareness and Civic Responsibility

Combining service projects such as those at MassPIRG and HEC with academic work encourages students not only to do "real world" writing, but also to develop social awareness and a sense of civic responsibility. We have used a variety of readings to generate writing and discussion in class on issues of democracy and justice and how they relate to the concepts of service and community. We explore different models of service and the implications of each for society. Although the 112 course allowed enough time for crafting projects to the needs of agencies, it offered less time for reflection on the larger issues of community, service, and social justice. Therefore, we planned an upper-division seminar, "Community Service Writing." In addition to requiring community projects, we devoted approximately half of class time to critical and analytical discussions of social awareness and civic responsibility. Our abiding interest in critical pedagogy, as articulated by such thinkers as Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, pointed us to possibilities for helping students to examine critically their own beliefs, social issues, and the forces that put people in need. By this time, we were also becoming aware of emerging scholarship on service learning in the disciplines (Kraft and Swandener 1994; Kendall and associates 1990), and innovative writing programs at Stanford (Watters and Ford 1995), Bentley (Herzberg 1994), Michigan State (Cooper and Julier 1995), and Carnegie Mellon (Peck, Flower, and Higgins 1995).

Relying on two anthologies about service learning (Albert 1994; Watters and Ford 1995) and other sources, we compiled a collection of readings ranging from historical works (e.g., excerpts from de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*) to literature (e.g., Toni Cade Bambara's short story "The Lesson" and Langston Hughes's poetry) to contemporary scholarship in the social sciences (e.g., essays on literacy, schooling, gender, and class) and articles on current social problems (e.g., homelessness, domestic violence, and education). We spent half of the seminar class time discussing, analyzing, and writing about the larger social context of service; the other half was spent in small groups and at the computer crafting writing projects for agencies. Encouraged by our discussions in that seminar on the critical, historical, and ethical contexts of service, we redesigned the basic course, 112, to include more reflection about the issues.

Beyond Composition

Interest in service learning has been growing, as suggested by new courses and programs across the country, regular paper presentations at national conferences, articles in scholarly journals, postings on the Internet and such new publications as the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*. A new series of monographs from the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) will address the relationship between service learning and individual disciplines. The first book, on composition, has been well received, and others are coming on accounting, education, political science, psychology, and

sociology. Additional disciplines will follow. That scholarship complements research in student development and student services (see Jacoby and associates 1996).

Recently we conducted a workshop on community service writing with Wellesley College faculty from across the disciplines. Winifred Wood, director of the Writing Program, commented on the workshop: This was the first time our faculty . . . have begun to think of combining community service work with the academic work of their classes. . . . You showed us that it [community service work] can be done in concert with the ongoing work of a course, that it can augment and enhance that work rather than work against it. Such responses are gratifying and affirm the value of service learning in composition courses. They also confirm the impulses of teachers to bring their disciplines to bear on community needs, and of many colleges to forge more meaningful and innovative connections with their communities.

Combining service with academic work is a way for us to manifest our values as educators and citizens. Although we no longer receive grant money, we continue to develop ways to include service projects in our curriculum because of their value. Service learning provides students a new way to think about writing. Perhaps for the first time, students realize that reading and writing are more than a packet of skills. They come to see literacy not only as a way of succeeding in the academy, but as acting in the world. Moving learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom is the best way that we have discovered concurrently to meet the needs of community agencies with limited resources, provide a context for significant learning, and encourage critical social awareness.

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