

5-1997

Service as a Bridge to Higher Education: Developing Service Learning in Developmental Studies

Elizabeth Bryer

Santa Fe Community College - Santa Fe

Carol Gish

Santa Fe Community College - Santa Fe

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcehighered>

 Part of the [Service Learning Commons](#)

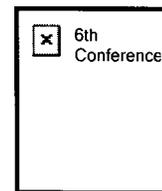
Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Bryer, Elizabeth and Gish, Carol, "Service as a Bridge to Higher Education: Developing Service Learning in Developmental Studies" (1997). *Higher Education*. 135.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcehighered/135>

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Home	Publications	Events	Projects	Staff
----------------------	------------------------------	------------------------	--------------------------	-----------------------

Community College National**Center for Community Engagement**6th Annual Conference
May 21-23, 1997**Service as a Bridge to Higher Education: Developing Service Learning in Developmental Studies**Elizabeth Bryer and Carol Gish
Santa Fe Community College, New Mexico

Though the new and exciting field of service learning has rapidly expanded to kindergarten through college, very little has been said about the appropriateness of service learning for developmental studies (pre-college) level students. Since developmental studies courses have in the past been labeled "remedial," perhaps it has been assumed that these students are not yet ready for the rigors and challenges of service learning. This is the story of one developmental studies department that has found that, on the contrary, service learning is precisely what our students need to help them smooth the sometimes intimidating transition into higher education.

We have chosen to tell this story together because the development of service learning in our programs has itself been a process of dialog. Elizabeth Bryer coordinates the Service Learning and AmeriCorps programs, and Carol Gish works with the Literacy Volunteers program. Implementing service learning in our department has drawn our programs into closer collaboration. In addition, because we both teach developmental studies writing courses, we share a perspective on service learning that is influenced by both classroom and administrative experiences. Co-authoring this article gives us the opportunity to continue our dialog on paper.

We have both become involved in service learning in large part because of the supportive environment of the Developmental Studies department where we work. Under the guidance of Dr. Meredith Machen, the department was founded with a service/activist orientation that assumes that education should help students take leadership roles in their community and change it for the better. Our experiences teaching in developmental studies classrooms have also drawn us to service learning. While teaching writing, the often challenging life situations of our students repeatedly call us out of the abstract realm and require us to ground our teaching in the real experiences of our students. What will make writing skills relevant to students who are trying to carve out a little time for academic study in the midst of demanding work and family responsibilities? What can each classroom experience offer them now, to take home today? These are the questions we consider as we seek to engage our students in the new world of higher education. Thus, it has seemed natural to us to include out-of-classroom experience as part of the curriculum.

One of the biggest hurdles any developmental teacher faces is students' fears that they are not capable of "making it" in school. Every teacher of developmental students must be constantly sensitive to the learning histories which students bring with them into the classroom. Our students come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are successful business owners with expensive homes; some are single mothers on welfare; some are recent high school drop-outs who got their GED's; some are middle-aged or older individuals who have not been in a classroom for thirty or more years, some are recent immigrants. Many had previous experiences with school they would rather forget. Despite the fact many developmental students have raised children, held steady jobs, and been responsible members of the community in a variety of other ways, few seem to recognize they have any skills at all when they are placed in pre-college level classes. They start to believe their life experiences and the skills they developed through them don't "count." Their past experiences of academic underachievement weigh heavily on their minds.

Every developmental teacher must constantly be looking for ways to inspire in her students a faith that old patterns of underachievement can be changed and replaced with new patterns of success. Service learning speaks eloquently to these challenges. First, by asking students to look at what they have to offer instead of what others have to offer them, service learning requires that students focus on their strengths. Secondly, our students are those who dropped out of school, or who did not excel in traditional skill areas. Thus, they are the most likely

candidates for service learning activities which focus on learning styles and skills not emphasized in traditional education. Third, by encouraging students to participate in service learning activities, we allow them to build a bridge to academics from a work-type setting that may be more familiar and successful for them.

Over the last ten years, our department's service orientation has grown from an ideal to an articulated focus that includes credit courses for volunteer service, a service learning office, an AmeriCorps program, a Literacy Volunteers program, and curriculum based service learning. The process of integrating service learning into developmental courses and services began six years ago when Dr. Machen developed a course entitled Human Development 170 -Volunteer Service. Through Volunteer Service, students do 30, 60, or 90 hours of service and receive 1,2, or 3 credits for their work. There are no class meetings; instead, students work independently on service projects and fulfill other course requirements to receive credit. In those early days, due to lack of funding, there was only limited support and guidance available for these volunteers. Students turned in a log of their volunteer hours and a paper on their experiences at the end of the semester in order to complete the course.

Despite the lack of infrastructure for the course, many volunteer service students succeeded memorably. One researched and designed a plan for a city-wide bus system that was instrumental in getting the city to use busses that run on natural gas. Another student, who wished to study physical therapy, placed out of introductory physical therapy courses when she transferred to a 4-year college because of her extensive service work in that field. Another practiced his Spanish skills by translating for native Spanish speakers at the municipal court.

It was these success stories that inspired Dr. Machen to write a grant proposal to the Corporation for National Service in 1994. Santa Fe Community College applied for Learn and Serve/Higher Ed and AmeriCorps funds and received both. With support from the Corporation, we were able to set up a Service Learning office for the first time and expand the curriculum and support provided to student volunteers. Volunteer Service students now keep journals and participate in a number of other reflection opportunities, sign contracts with the agencies with whom they work in which they define their learning objectives, and are evaluated by their agency supervisors at the end of the class. Word-of-mouth and weekly notices about the course in the student newspaper have increased enrollment in the course over 100% since the first year of the corporation grant to roughly 50 students a semester.

The added support and reflection available to Volunteer Service students has noticeably improved the quality of their experiences. Having a service learning office means there is a staff person available to call students during the semester to see how their service is going and to help them troubleshoot when problems come up. Often, it is the most challenging circumstances which are the most educational, but without the one-on-one support of service-learning staff, many volunteers prefer to ignore frustrations they are experiencing at their worksite rather than work them through. With support staff on hand, students often have the courage to practice problemsolving and communication skills at their worksites.

Like the Volunteer Service course, the AmeriCorps program was designed with developmental students in mind. What Dr. Machen envisioned was a leadership training program in which adults who were once at-risk themselves tutored and mentored at-risk youth at three public schools. We focused our recruitment of 20 part-time AmeriCorps members on students in Developmental Studies. We told applicants concerned about the level of their academic skills not to worry, they did not need college degrees in order to be effective tutors and mentors.

Developmental students were much more difficult to recruit than other more highly skilled community members. Many developmental students have limited financial resources and could not afford to work part-time for a living allowance that comes out to \$5 an hour. Nevertheless, at least one third of the first 40 AmeriCorps members have been students in developmental studies programs.

Through AmeriCorps we have learned much about the power of enlisting students in developmental studies programs to do service work. First of all, we have learned that college students with low English and math skills can be exceptionally effective tutors and mentors. Though these members did not achieve exceptional success in school, the fact that they nevertheless made it to the community college means they are developing resiliency and the skills they need to motivate themselves -- skills that they readily model for the children they serve. When one tutor was confronted with helping a child with math problems she herself did not know how to do, she realized that "if I face my own fears about math and ask another tutor for help in front of the kids, maybe they'll understand that it's okay not to know things and that you never really stop learning and needing to ask for help." These mentors naturally identify with their mentees. When introduced to the low-achieving students with whom they will work, they reject any conventional notions that those students are "lazy" or "bad" and immediately concern themselves with how they can help the student learn. What these tutors understand is, as one AmeriCorps member wrote in

her journal, "every student wants to do well."

The mentoring relationships that formed in AmeriCorps were as profound for the mentors as they were for the mentees. AmeriCorps members in developmental studies programs were particularly changed by their experience of providing 900 hours of tutoring and mentoring. What we saw these AmeriCorps members experience is a pattern that is becoming increasingly familiar to us as we recruit more and more of these students to perform service.

When a student who believes he doesn't know anything about writing is asked to tutor a third grader in English, at first, he may express fear and doubt that he has anything to teach. He thinks, "I don't understand the difference between an independent and dependent clause, so how can I help a third-grader?" When he is reminded that most third graders are still learning to read and spell and that many that need tutoring don't even speak English, the college student's confidence is increased. He starts to remember what he does know: how to read, how to write a simple book report, how to speak. The tutor begins to focus on the skills that he has instead of those he doesn't have. While helping other, younger students develop the confidence and skills they need to succeed, he will develop the skills he needs to succeed himself: the ability to see what's going right in the learning environment instead of what's going wrong, the ability to note even small signs of progress, the ability to believe absolutely that learning will take place even if not at the pace originally expected. He will also see first-hand the factors that endanger the learning process: becoming overwhelmed by the learning tasks at hand, becoming discouraged by mistakes, the fear of failure that can become so powerful that a student resists tutoring and resists learning. Seeing these dynamics in another learner teaches the college student much about how learning does and does not happen and resonates powerfully with his own experience in developmental classes. As one AmeriCorps member put it, "The students are my mentors as much as I am theirs."

What we saw with both the improvement of the Volunteer Service course and the establishment of the AmeriCorps Program that came with our Corporation grant was that students who might be unexceptional in the classroom could be exceptional at a volunteer site and that success in the latter could spread to success in the former. By placing these students in situations where they feel powerful and effective, we remind them of the skills they have to build on in a classroom setting. In addition, by requiring they keep journals and write papers about their service, we allow them to use their strengths as volunteers as bridges to the development of more traditional academic skills. One AmeriCorps member, who had spent 12 years working on an associate's degree, made the dean's list for the first time during her AmeriCorps year of service. She credits the program with making her a stronger student. "It wasn't until AmeriCorps," she said, "that my education made sense."

Now that we have a service learning office, the department has been able to take what we have learned from the AmeriCorps program and begin to incorporate service learning directly into other course curricula. Dr. Machen and Elizabeth are promoting the idea of curriculum-based service learning throughout the college by meeting with instructors and setting up faculty inservice presentations. Along with the Nursing, Education, Human Services, and Business faculty, Developmental Studies teachers and staff have been particularly responsive to service-learning as a pedagogy. The Adult Basic Education program, as part of its five-year goal-setting process, has adopted the goal of integrating service learning into GED (high school equivalency) courses, with a special focus on service learning projects for younger students who may not yet be able to take the GED test, but who need to be involved in a stimulating school program that treats them like adults. Adult Basic Education students are also encouraged to engage in volunteer work that helps them explore a certain career interest, or to work as tutors or volunteer office staff within the Developmental Studies program. Even though they do not yet have their high school or GED diploma, they can enroll in the volunteer service course and start building college credit.

Curriculum-based service learning is also becoming a compelling way to encourage the college student body to participate as tutors in the Literacy Volunteers program. Carol is developing a course which combines the developmental studies writing course, English Review, with volunteer tutoring of students learning English as a Second Language. Students can earn 1, 2, or 3 additional credits through Human Development 282--English as a Second Language Tutor Field Experience.

In this combined course, the focus of the tutoring experience is to empower the English Review students as learners. Students will be encouraged to examine their own learning process and consider different learning styles in order to discover the most effective way to tutor their students. By placing students in teaching roles, Carol hopes to help them discover that teachers don't have to know all the answers. Students who view teachers as experts instead of facilitators of learning often have a hard time being active, questioning learners. Breaking out of this pattern will help students become more responsible for their own educational choices.

Because the service agency, Literacy Volunteers, is housed on campus, the logistics of arranging service opportunities will be simplified. English Review students will attend a four-part workshop on tutoring techniques. They will be matched with ESL students who are on campus for ESL classes, and who want to put in extra time studying. For the hour before the English Review class, the classroom will be turned into a tutoring center where tutors can meet with tutees in a supportive environment where others are doing similar work, and where the instructor

Incomplete document.

[Home](#) [Publications](#) [Events](#) [Projects](#) [Staff](#)