

12-1-2002

Unfolding narratives of service learning: Reflections on teaching, literacy, and positioning in service relationships

Caroline T. Clark

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

Recommended Citation

Clark, Caroline T., "Unfolding narratives of service learning: Reflections on teaching, literacy, and positioning in service relationships" (2002). *Service Learning, General*. 188.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/188>

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



Unfolding narratives of service learning: Reflections on teaching, literacy, and positioning in service relationships

Caroline T. Clark

Service learning is becoming a staple of U.S. public school requirements, and this research should help practitioners better appreciate the dynamics and complexity of the situation.

In the 1990s, calls to engage citizens in the United States at all levels in community service and service learning proliferated. Spanning partisan lines, Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton both signed and endorsed national and community service legislation. (The National and Community Service Act of 1990 was amended by The National Community Service Trust Act of 1993.) Clinton also convened the President's Summit for America's Future in April 1997, highlighting service and volunteerism as one of five key "promises" that Americans must keep in order for their children to thrive. Similarly, academics have explored and endorsed the value of service learning for students in K-12 and college and university settings (Kraft & Swadener, 1994; LeSourd, 1997) across disciplines and areas ranging from composition and English studies (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, & Watters, 1997; Minter, Gere, & Keller-Cohen, 1995) to teacher education (Anderson & Guest, 1994; Michalec, 1994; Wade, 1997). While the history and tradition of volunteerism and community service in the United States is rich, with roots in the works of such scholars and activists as Jane

Addams, Dorothy Day, and John Dewey, only recently has such a wholesale mandate for service learning been actualized.

Given this push for participation in service learning, it seems wise for educators to be prepared for the possibilities and hazards of such endeavors. With more and more K-12 schools requiring service on the part of students, both preservice and inservice teachers will require a clear understanding of how service and learning coalesce. Moreover, as colleges and universities encourage participation in service, particularly in the area of literacy, educators in these settings will also need to know more about these endeavors. It is with these trends in service in mind that I share these reflections on teaching, service learning, and literacy.

In this article, I take up the question of "positioning" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48) in service and resituate it in the context of a literacy and service learning course that I cotaught. From this perspective, I examine the kinds of framing and positioning issues that arise in service sites, especially in sites aimed at literacy learning. Here, I look closely at one student in the course, Seth, and his work with two students, David and Kevin, and at my own tutoring work with a student, Allan (all names are pseudonyms). Finally, I discuss the possibilities that arise when service occurs in conjunction with learning and, in particular, when those who teach such courses also serve. I argue, in effect, that engaging in service

Clark teaches at Ohio State University, Columbus (200 Ramseyer, 29 W. Woodruff Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210, USA). E-mail clark.684@osu.edu.

learning with our students in nonschool sites allowed all of us to reflect on the roles and functions of service providers and those who are served and on literacy learning in and out of school.

Ventures into volunteerism

Reading Robert Coles's *The Call of Service: A Witness to Idealism* (1993) and reflecting on my own participation as the teacher of a service learning course for college students reminds me of the times in my life when I have heard, and heeded, that call. I have spent evenings and nights at a rotating homeless shelter that was housed cyclically in our local Catholic school gymnasium; participated in our campus's Alternative Spring Break; and spent memorable times constructing a home in a rural Appalachian community and helping farmers build a local, cooperatively owned greenhouse where they could centrally grow and sell their produce and wares. Prior to reading Coles and to teaching this course, I had never really thought of those past ventures as service.

While all were clearly tagged "volunteer," I had entered those activities thinking more of myself than of the other (Bernstein, 1991). Most of my ventures into volunteerism had come at times in my life when I was feeling personally confused or at a loss. Pouring my energies into larger social issues allowed me to forget about my own stresses and conflicts. Failing to see the other side, I found that service was easily reduced and trivialized such that it potentially worked "against itself by celebrating the deeds of the doer...and by failing to listen to the done-to" (Radest, 1993, p. 177). Reflecting on the positionings of self and other in service relationships led me to a place of critique, a place to work through the structuring of these relationships and their implications for service learning and literacy teaching.

As an individual engaged in service and committed to service learning, I am compelled to acknowledge the problematic power dynamics of

service relationships. What happens, for example, when help and need become the foundations for these relationships? Potentially, as Radest pointed out, by "demeaning the other as a receiver of services, we confirm our alienation from him or her, reinforce our sense of power and our state of privilege" (p. 76). Prompted by Radest, I am inclined to interrogate the problematic power dynamics and positionings involved in service learning relationships by looking closely at one service learning context.

The service learning context

The service learning course, *Learning Communities*, was situated at a large midwestern university and two community sites—an after-school tutoring program at a local middle school and a similar program at a neighborhood community center. Together with our college students, my co-instructor and I tutored elementary students in the community and engaged in a weekly literacy seminar. As a teacher educator, I found this was a unique teaching situation. Our prospective students would be noneducation majors from throughout the university and spanning a range of age levels and interests; in short, we would not be teaching teachers. Yet, in many ways, these students would be taking more immediate charge of a teaching situation and having, perhaps, a more profound and direct impact on students than most of the preservice teachers with whom I had worked. Our move in the course, then, was to tack between these two positions. We offered students general readings on the theoretical, historical, and sociopolitical contexts of literacy education, but we also offered them readings in which teacher-researchers described their own approaches to practice. These included readings from an edited volume by Vipond and Strahl (1994); a reader that included selections by literacy teacher-researchers such as Vivian Paley, Karen Gallas, Cynthia Ballenger, and Paula Murphy; and works by Valerie Polakow, Lisa Delpit, and Robert Coles.

We saw the course as consisting of three components that supported students' learning about literacy in conjunction with service—reading, writing, and dialogue. The readings, as described, were chosen to help mediate and navigate the students' interests and needs as educators. Writings were designed to enable students to reflect on these readings and on their practices as tutors and to bring these two discourses into dialogue with each other. Students were required to keep tutor logs, which chronicled their experiences on site, and reading notes in which they responded to the weekly reading assignments. In both of these writing assignments, students were encouraged to bring the other discourse into play, reflecting in their tutor logs on instances where a reading might be particularly relevant to what they were doing or seeing at their tutoring sites. They were also to comment in their reading notes on instances when what they experienced in tutoring allowed them to hold a particular kind of lens to a reading.

In addition, students often drew on their own personal histories as learners in making meaning of their tutoring situations and the weekly readings. Finally, through our class discussions and dialogues, students had opportunities to listen to and hear about others' experiences with tutoring and responses to readings. Here, students could juxtapose their own reflections on service, learning, and literacy with those of their peers in the course. My co-instructor and I actively participated in these dialogues, not only as teacher-evaluators but also as tutors. Our positioning as tutors in these dialogues seemed to make a difference in the nature and kind of discourse that developed. Unlike in many classroom situations, students turned to one another for help in solving tutoring problems as frequently as they turned to us. Furthermore, we were often in situations where we found ourselves turning to the students, as peer-tutors, in figuring out ways of working with our own tutoring students. As a former Learning Communities instructor put it,

[Serving as a tutor] was so very humbling. Working with seven-year-olds or ten-year-olds, none of my usual teacher strategies worked. Jokes fell flat. Puns were overlooked. I came to sympathize with the college student/tutors on a new level. I think I became more patient with the college students in their efforts.

Our overall philosophy, then, was aimed at enabling students to reflect productively on the nature of literacy and their service experiences through the acts of reading, writing, and dialogue.

Teaching and tutoring together

I was actively involved in tutoring on site, in addition to supervising and helping out the college students with their tutoring. As an instructor of the course for the entire academic year, I was a constant at the neighborhood community center site, which I'll call Southside. All of the children came to know me well, and often, when the college students were absent, I tutored their students. But my primary relationship was with Allan, an African American second grader. The school had labeled Allan as learning disabled, and I came to find out that he was in a self-contained special education classroom for most of the day, being mainstreamed for activities such as music, art, physical education, and science. His teacher would often send homework for Allan, and, as was the general practice of the Southside center, we tutors were to help students with their homework first before proceeding to any other literacy activities. Allan brought with him a steady stream of homework, generally two double-sided workbook pages each night. In looking at them closely, I saw that the publication date for these materials was 1968. They were, primarily, phonics worksheets, with an occasional math skills sheet thrown in for variety.

Reading, however, had been deemed Allan's problem, so most of the sheets involved letter-sound relationships. Most often, the sheets contained pictures of objects under which Allan had to write the appropriate initial consonant sound.

A quick study, Allan aptly figured out that the pictures were often repeated and that he could look back at previous answers in figuring out the remainder of the worksheet. Frequently, these worksheets were the source of great consternation for Allan and me. For Allan, they could at times prove frustrating, especially coming at the end of a long day already spent in school, and they often took up great chunks of our time together. For me, they proved frustrating because they limited the time and opportunities for us to engage in other kinds of literacy activities. But, because they were deemed homework, Allan was vehemently unwilling to move on to any other activity until we had completed these worksheets.

Unfolding narratives of service

Positioning in service relationships. Homework, then, became a central, discursive, constitutive force at work in the tutoring sites. As part of the discourse of school, homework carried with it the powerful force of that institution. In many instances, it was central to how college students came to frame and position themselves and their students. In Allan's case, it was central to how he positioned himself in relation to me. Here I use *position* as Davies and Harré (1990) did, as a metaphor for discussing the ways in which individuals are constituted and reconstituted through social interactions and discursive practices. As participants in one another's story lines, individuals, through discourse, either explicitly or implicitly make subject positions available that may be taken up (or not) by another. Davies and Harré described this positioning in discursively produced story lines as similar to the ways in which readers of stories are positioned in alignment with or opposition to various characters, thus opening up the possibility for multiple, even contradictory, readings.

Similarly, in human interaction, even though a speaker may position another in a story line, that other may (a) understand the cultural stereotype at work in the discourse differently

than the speaker; (b) pursue his or her own story line, unaware of the story line that was implied by the first speaker; or (c) be aware of the implicit story line but choose, instead, to resist it. How interlocutors understand the story lines in which they are embedded, then, is a critical element in establishing how positions are taken up, or not. The usefulness of the theoretical concept of positioning, as Davies and Harré (1990) pointed out, "is that it serves to direct our attention to a process by which certain trains of consequences, intended or unintended, are set in motion" (p. 51).

Positioning is quite different from the idea of role as the basis for action (Goffman, 1959)—what Davies and Harré (1990) called the "dramaturgical model" in which "people are construed as actors with lines already written and their roles determined by the particular play they find themselves in" (p. 52). This model suggests an absence or loss of agency on some fundamental level. Positioning, however, allows for the possibilities of agency and the influence of our subjectively lived histories as we enter into narratives and story lines with one another.

Shared and unshared story lines. Homework, then, was part of the larger narrative of service and tutoring. But how did the college students and I understand these story lines, these unfolding narratives? And how did the children whom we tutored see them? As part of the story line, the college student tutors placed children in positions that could be taken up or not. Homework was often a discursive marker for this positioning—it helped the college students construct their story lines; it guided their positioning of the children. In addition, most of us—students and instructors alike—came from middle-class homes, and most had experienced success in schools. Entering the tutoring situation from this perspective caused the college students to position, to some extent, the "problem" of school success in the child with whom they were working. Furthermore, the college student tutors entered expecting their student collaborators to "need" them. Clearly, if

these children were attending after-school tutoring sessions, they needed academic help.

It is interesting to note the varying responses by tutors to the presence or absence of homework among the students at Southside. For me, as a tutor, I found the presence of Allan's homework a problematic annoyance that kept me from engaging in more productive literacy experiences with him. For many of the college tutors, however, the absence of homework was problematic. They often struggled over "what to do" with their students who didn't bring homework, and many of them often implored their students to bring homework to the tutoring sessions. For me, these interactions point to an interesting juncture of discursive constructions at work in the tutoring sites. I now see how homework became a marker of sorts, a lens through which tutors could focus on and clarify their images of the student(s) with whom they worked and the nature of their literacy work together. This lens could, subsequently, be affirmed or resisted. For example, the focusing lens of Allan's homework cast him, in part, as a low-achieving student, one whose engagement in literacy should be confined, primarily, to sound-symbol relationships. My own interactions with Allan, however, outside the school context where such labels as "learning disabled" and "hyperactive" had been assigned to him, led me to resist actively this positioning of him as a learner. Instead, I was anxious to build on Allan's keen interest in sports and his new-found love of Mercer Mayer books with activities that involved him in constructing meaning from texts and framing his own stories and ideas in print.

Conversely, one of the college tutors, Seth, was consistently frustrated by the lack of homework from his two tutoring students, Kevin and David. These two students, both African American, one a third grader and one in fifth grade, came to the Southside site nearly without fail. With equal regularity, however, David, in particular, came without homework. For Seth, a white male student in his second semester at the university, this tended to lead to a struggle over

"what to do" with the boys. Seth's tutor log reflections reveal how he was positioning David in particular; how David resisted taking up that position; and how a shift in positionings was negotiated, resulting in a new, more equitable, service narrative or story line. In his tutor log, Seth recounted,

Today was a very difficult day. David never comes with work, and he spends the whole time disrupting Kevin. I told him that I was not there to baby-sit, but rather to help, and that he needed to be serious about his studies before we can have fun. David kept complaining that I wasn't fun. I frankly am having a hard time. I don't know if I should switch off of David because he really disrupts Kevin when I am working with Kevin, and he never has his own work to do. (February 6)

Here, I would argue, without the lens of homework to focus and clarify his image of David as a student, Seth is frustrated. His language reveals his attempts to situate David in different discourses and to position him in his service story line. In his story line or narrative of service, he has an expectation that David and Kevin will need "help." Homework serves to situate and frame discursively what help means. Seth's first attempt is to construct David as someone without "real" work to do and, as such, a "baby." The move to frame himself as "not there to baby-sit," in some ways, opens the door for Seth to stop working with David. The alternative position, which he offers David, is as a needy or victimized student, someone who needs help because Seth is there "to help." Extending this positioning, he also moves to construct literacy learning in this context as something that is not "fun" because fun occurs after David has been "serious about his studies." David, across time, resists these constructions, just as Seth resists David's construction of him as someone who isn't "fun." Without the school discourse of homework to guide him, Seth struggles with how he should relate to David as a literacy tutor.

Struggling to share authority. The situation between Seth and David did not improve. For the

first month of tutoring, Seth consistently tried to position David as in need of help, and David, in turn, resisted. Two days after the entry quoted, however, David did come in with homework. Seth wrote in his tutor log:

Today David came with work. Unfortunately, he didn't also come with instructions. I tried to figure out how to do his paper with him, but he had trouble explaining and didn't have any patience with letting me help him. He seemed to not think that I knew what I was doing. I now see that I'm going to have to build up some confidence and credibility with him before I'll be able to really help. (February 8)

Once again, by positioning himself as someone who will *help* David, Seth inadvertently persists in positioning David as *helpless*. As he says, David "didn't have any patience with letting me help him." Seth takes this to be a credibility issue and feels he needs to work harder and prove he is a trustworthy and competent literacy tutor before he can "really help" David. An alternative read, however, is that David was actively resisting being constructed as helpless. Seth's later tutor-log entries seem to support this alternative reading:

David had to write things he liked and disliked about school. He elected to do this on his own and not show it to me. I allowed this; I want him to know his writing can be personal, and I'm only there if he wants me. Afterwards, he eagerly went to make Valentines with Gail. He seemed eager to be creative. I hope to be able to channel that into his writing. (February 13)

Here, Seth reads David's move to keep his work to himself as a public/private issue. Again, however, an alternative read, one that recognizes a fuller sense of David's agency, allows us to see David as positioning himself as able and not in need of help. Seth, however, maintains his own agency as tutor as he recognizes David's creative energy, yet hopes that he, the tutor, will be able to "channel that into [David's] writing."

The next tutoring session brought with it a major conflict between Seth and David. Seth told the story of that day in his tutor log:

Today I went and had my toughest time yet. It was Valentine's Day so none of the kids wanted to work. That was fine, I was willing to give the kids a day to just play with us. But I wasn't ready for what happened. Kevin and I were playing a game similar to Chinese checkers, and David just didn't want to play. He disrupted our game and ran around messing with everyone. Then he took my hat. I tried to be patient and didn't pay much attention to his antics. Then he ran into the bathroom. I was really worried he was throwing my hat down the toilet. When he came out the hat was nowhere to be found, except when he showed me that he had put it down his pants. Boy, did that piss me off. I had to go outside to cool off or else I really might have gone off on him. He came out. I told him he had no respect for me, for others' property, for what the purpose of tutoring was all about. He looked very upset. He said he was sorry. I told him I didn't know why he even bothered coming to the center when all he did was make trouble. He said he liked to meet people. I told him I wanted him to seriously think about what he wanted out of the center and be prepared on Monday. He agreed. (February 14)

Seth's retelling of this incident demonstrates how clearly he and David are not embedded in the same narrative. After the antic with the hat, Seth positions David as a trouble maker and as someone who does not understand the purposes of tutoring—a move, on Seth's part, that assumes a common narrative of service and tutoring. Even when David clearly states how he positions himself in tutoring—as someone who comes in order to meet people because he likes to meet people—Seth cannot hear his story line. Instead, he directs David to go home and think seriously about what he wants out of the center and to "be prepared on Monday."

Because of our carpool system, Seth and I rode home together from tutoring that night. He was clearly upset, and during the drive back to his dorm he recounted the incident and his frustrations with David to me. As a tutor myself, and a regular presence on site, I could offer an alternative story line. I could help Seth reposition himself and David. This is something I could not have done without being a tutor myself. I would have no place—or at least a very different place—in this narrative were I not involved in my own

story line. Also, Seth could view my struggles and successes with Allan; he could see that I was involved in my own unfolding narrative of service. I listened to his concerns and suggested that he think about David's response to the question "Why do you come to tutoring?" Perhaps David was trying to tell him something—that he really does come to tutoring to meet people. Seth asserted that this was not a good reason to come to tutoring from his perspective. If David came to tutoring to meet people, then what was he supposed to do to help him? I agreed that this was problematic, but maybe he could try to think about *help* a bit differently. What kind of help was David seeking? Seth neither agreed nor disagreed with my take on the situation, and he didn't share any plans for change on our way to the next tutoring session. However, on the drive home that evening, he was quick to tell both another student tutor and me that things had gone a lot better. In his tutor log, he shared the details of the session:

As bad as the last time went, this time went good. I came in with the attitude that the center was no longer going to be a place where I could come to teach; rather, I would approach it as a place to get to know my kids and let them establish how much learning would take place. The kids loved it. I joked with them, calling them punks and whatnot. They learned that they could just talk to me, and it was their decision as to how much work they would really accomplish. I got this outlook from Caroline, who redefined my view of the word *help*. (February 21)

Seth's next tutor log opens with "Today went equally well," and across the following weeks, this trend continues. Rather than persistently comparing David's lack of homework to the fact that Kevin has homework, Seth begins to think about the tutoring situation from a more learner-centered perspective. Furthermore, without the preconstructing lens of homework to shape his positioning of the children, Seth's narrative is open to change and possibility. A new story line emerges, one that allows the boys and Seth to begin to reconstitute who they are and

how they interact in this relationship. As Seth wrote,

Neither of the children came with work today, so I decided I'd teach them new stuff. I taught them things considerably above their levels (turning fractions into decimals, the elements of a complex sentence), and they responded enthusiastically. Their reactions tell me that they are happy about learning and can even be eager.... I am building strong relationships with them. (March 11)

While Seth implicitly positions the boys on some lower level by describing the work as "above their levels," he also acknowledges their enthusiastic response to the tasks, their role in the unfolding narrative. Seth's recognition of their agency in tutoring has shifted the focus of his role from simply helping the boys with their homework and schooling to truly engaging with another and "building strong relationships." In Seth's next tutor log, we see further evidence of this shift.

Today went very well. David, Kevin and I joked around a lot, but more importantly we got some work done and got to play together at the end. David seems quite passionately happy about having learned to turn fractions into decimals. When he came in today he immediately asked me to write some down for him to do. I obliged, and he tackled them all. (March 18)

It is clear in Seth's recounting that control over what tutoring will mean has shifted for the three of them. Clearly, there is a marked change in the focus of service as help to service as building relationships. The two story lines—Seth's initial narrative of literacy tutoring as help and David's narrative of literacy tutoring as meeting people—have been reconstituted through their changing discursive practices. Rather than struggling over having and not having homework, Seth and David are engaging in something wholly new and negotiated by the two of them—turning fractions into decimals. Instead of waiting for the external cue of school and homework to signify what literacy tutoring will mean and to provide direction, Seth can now rely on David to share in that

direction—as he does when he comes in and asks for some new fractions to tackle.

These interactions between Seth and David, in particular, highlight the amount and kinds of authority negotiation occurring in the tutoring site. The college student tutors, in many ways, had to give up their knowledge and authority in order for productive learning to occur. Similarly, we as teachers of the course also learned from this relinquishing of authority. As tutors, we were subject to these same requisite pedagogical shifts in power. Subsequently, these affected our teaching of the course and our teaching in general. This may account for the qualitatively different kind of discourse that was present in our university classroom—a more equal sharing of power and authority to some degree. Their opportunity to experience firsthand these pedagogical negotiations of authority enabled the college students to begin to critique the preconstructing discourse of schooling and the power issues involved in literacy teaching and learning. Their work with students, in conjunction with their readings, writings, and class discussions, came together to create a genuine service learning experience.

Further reflections

The concept of positioning provides a lens through which to view the service relationship, a way to understand the unfolding narrative of service that is negotiated, in our case, by tutor and child. This lens reveals the problematic power dynamics involved in service learning; however, it also points to the possibilities of such relationships, particularly in terms of literacy. Looking closely at the relationship between Seth and David and reflecting on my own positioning as teacher and tutor have led me to some tentative conclusions.

First, I would assert that learning must accompany service. Learning in conjunction with service is critical if we are to avoid positioning others as helpless or needy against their own constructions of self. While some might assume that

this is no longer an issue and that service and learning are now clearly connected, experience tells me otherwise. All too frequently, high school and middle school students are required to complete community service work in order to graduate, without any discussion of these interactions in a classroom context. Students need opportunities to be both supported and challenged as they reflect on their service work. In our course, it was through their writing of tutor logs, their response to readings, and our ongoing class discussions that students were able to begin to challenge the taken-for-granted stereotypes that framed their initial narratives of service and their positionings of self and other.

As teachers of these courses, it is crucial, too, that we serve—that we spend time in service sites along with our students. Knowing the sites, and the day-to-day work that occurs there, allows us to know the particularities of our students' service relationships. We get to know them better, yes, but we also get to know the children with whom they work. As such, we are more able to see how narratives of service unfold between tutor and child and able, too, to support students in seeing how the child is positioned in these narratives. By serving along with our students and working as tutors ourselves, we are also embedded in unfolding narratives of service and must struggle, as well, with the concomitant negotiations of positioning. Our work as tutor reconfigures our role as teacher, providing the ground for a more collaborative classroom space where, along with our students, we construct and reconstruct what it means to learn through service.

In service work around literacy, we need to expand our conceptions of literacies such that the social aspects of literacy are taken up, recognized, and valued. In many ways, the case of Seth and David is similar to Ballenger's (1999) work with Haitian preschoolers. In her study, Ballenger chronicled how students' social intentions interacted with their literacy learning. What developed was a "shadow curriculum, uses of print that were outside of [her] plans and expectations" (p. 45).

Recognizing and valuing a “shadow curriculum” is part of what helped to reshape and redirect Seth and David’s relationship in a more productive direction.

It is critical, too, that we rethink where and why we serve. As we engage in service with children, particularly around issues of literacy, I would suggest that we situate more of this work in nonschool sites. Such sites might include community centers like Southside. Or, they might include other sites of what Gere (1994) called the “extracurriculum”—neighborhood-based organizations, such as the youth basketball associations described by Mahiri (1994) and the dance troupes and Afrocentric rites of passage programs described by Ball (Ball, 1995; Ball & Heath, 1993). Working in nonschool-based sites may help to resituate narratives of service away from the pre-constructive lenses of homework and school, among others, and enable an expanded conception of literacies. This is not to say that such pre-constructs can be avoided, for the unfolding narratives that we create together are always based in our sociocultural, historical, and personal backgrounds. Nonetheless, as in the case of Seth and David, without a school-based, directive lens for focus and to frame who our students are, we open up the possibilities to construct, together, what their and our engagement in literacies might be.

Finally, I contend that we must move from service as a response to “crisis” and think, instead, of service “under conditions of ordinariness” (Radest, 1993, p. 177). Rather than sending our students out (and engaging ourselves) in response to the literacy crisis or the plight of the homeless, we might, instead, think of service in ordinary terms, as an “encounter with strangers” (Radest, 1993). Seth, in his response to a set of readings we had assigned, reminds us that we, as teachers of service learning courses, may be culpable in creating this sense of crisis and thus lead our students to give up in the face of such overwhelming odds. Seth wrote, “These readings are giving me a sense of helplessness. There are so many problems, and

so many issues that have to be addressed with the current educational system” (February 10). But, just as we do not want our students to feel overwhelmed or distanced by this sense of crisis, we also want to guard against their overpersonalization of service situations. As Herzberg (1994) pointed out, “If our students regard social problems as chiefly or only personal, then they will not search beyond the person for a systemic explanation” (p. 309).

Our challenge, then, is to strike a balance: not just to help students recognize the broader social context in which literacy and other issues are embedded but also enable them to connect with an “other” on a personal level—to be open to an encounter with strangers. We best do this by engaging with our students in service, learning, and literacy in a broad array of sites and contexts under conditions of ordinariness. Resituating service in the ordinary foregrounds the nature of positioning and opens up “the possibility of a reciprocal interchange of positions” such that “community service is not a transference of what is mine...but rather a restoration of what is mine and what is yours as human beings” (Radest, 1993, p. 179). In such spaces, we can engage in service in more complex, respectful, and mutually beneficial ways and shape more productive constructions of literacy learning.

REFERENCES

- Adler-Kassner, L., Crooks, R., & Watters, A. (Eds.). (1997). *Writing the community: Concepts and models for service-learning in composition*. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.
- Anderson, J.B., & Guest, K. (1994). Service learning in teacher education. In R.J. Kraft & M. Swadener (Eds.), *Building community: Service learning in the academic disciplines* (pp. 139-148). Denver, CO: Colorado Campus Compact.
- Ball, A. (1995). Community-based learning in urban settings as a model for educational reform. *Applied Behavioral Science Review*, 3(2), 127-146.
- Ball, A., & Heath, S.B. (1993). Dances of identity: Finding an ethnic self in the arts. In S.B. Heath & M.W. McLaughlin (Eds.), *Identity and inner-city youth: Beyond ethnicity and gender* (pp. 69-93). New York: Teachers College Press.

- Ballenger, C. (1999). *Teaching other people's children: Literacy and learning in a bilingual classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bernstein, R. (1991). *The new constellation: The ethical-political horizons of modernity/postmodernity*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Coles, R. (1993). *The call of service: A witness to idealism*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20(1), 43-63.
- Gere, A.R. (1994). Kitchen tables and rented rooms: The extracurriculum of composition. *College Composition and Communication*, 45(1), 75-107.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Herzberg, B. (1994). Community service and critical teaching. *College Composition and Communication*, 45, 307-319.
- Kraft, R.J., & Swadener, M. (Eds.). (1994). *Building community: Service learning in the academic disciplines*. Denver, CO: Colorado Campus Compact.
- LeSourd, S.J. (1997). Community service learning. *Theory Into Practice*, 36(3), 134-135.
- Mahiri, J. (1994). African American males and learning: What discourse in sports offers schooling. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 25, 364-375.
- Michalec, P. (1994). Service learning and the multicultural education of preservice teachers. In R.J. Kraft & M. Swadener (Eds.), *Building community: Service learning in the academic disciplines* (pp. 169-176). Denver, CO: Colorado Campus Compact.
- Minter, D.W., Gere, A.R., & Keller-Cohen, D. (1995). Learning literacies. *College English*, 57, 669-686.
- Radest, H.B. (1993). *Community service: Encounter with strangers*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Vipond, D.L., & Strahl, R. (Eds.). (1994). *Literacy: Language and power*. Long Beach, CA: The University Press, California State University, Long Beach.
- Wade, R.C. (1997). Empowerment in student teaching through community service learning. *Theory Into Practice*, 36(3), 184-191.

**Place your ad in
THE READING TEACHER
and/or
JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENT
& ADULT LITERACY**

and reach top reading educators with news about your products, services, position openings, conferences/seminars, etc. at a very **reasonable** cost.

CALL NOW:

Linda Hunter, Advertising Manager
(302) 731-1600, ext. 261
FAX 302-369-8476

08-27 A&M 6/00

**Do you have a
position opening in
the reading field?**

We can help you find the highly qualified person you are looking for. Contact IRA Advertising Manager, Linda Hunter, at 302-731-1600, ext. 261 or lhunter@reading.org. We offer special discounted rates for position opening ads.

01-128 A&M 11/01