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Literature and Service Learning: Not Strange Bedfellows

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**Literature and Service Learning:
Not Strange Bedfellows**

**National Information Center
for Service Learning
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**by
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In my eight years of teaching classes with a service dimension, I was struck by its absence in any literature department I had encountered. One might expect literary study to be an especially apt partner to service learning. Service brings the social context of the text a major emphasis of contemporary literary criticism into the classroom with gripping immediacy. The direct experience with people and problems otherwise inaccessible seems to inspire in students a questioning attentiveness to the subtleties of literary texts and the complex explorations of cultural forces and personal interactions those narratives can offer. Conversely, students who are originally drawn to literature for the unusual understanding and compassion it evokes can find service a gratifyingly substantive way to act on newly awakened concerns.

Why then the noticeable absence of service learning in literature courses? The standard problem faced by advocates of service learning today is that most university English teachers are even not cognizant that such a possibility exists. A more troublesome obstacle is actual hostility, most pithily summarized in a question from an admired colleague: Is this a course in the humane-ities or the humanities? While it would be easy to rail at this distinction, I was saved from the pleasures of righteous indignation by the fact that until recently I had not included a service element in my literature classes either. Rather, my service classes had generally revolved around social and philosophical issues, such as Gandhian philosophy or western individualism. My own doubts as to whether doing good could really be relevant to the academic aims of doing literature may aid others in understanding such professional resistance. More importantly, I hope that the answers at which I arrived might be helpful to those who would also like to integrate service learning and literary study but are still pondering the methods and justifications whereby they might do so.

Like most literary critics, I have a strong aversion to simplistic readings of texts, especially those readings oblivious to their basis in a particular interpretive framework and thus especially vulnerable to assuming a unilateral hold on the truth of the matter. In this time of quick-fix sound bites, Virtual Reality, and multi-media manipulation, the need to help students see the pleasure and value of a close, thoughtful reading of texts seems more pressing than ever. One might easily question then whether a service learning experience would necessarily promote the training in skilled and sensitive textual analysis that most of us see as our raison d'être. Worse yet, what if the urgent desire to be helpful encouraged students to reduce the text to an illustration of a social problem or political value?

Discourse Analysis

While I have many ideas about how to integrate service and literary text within a sophisticated theoretical/critical framework, the two classes which I have constructed and taught to date do so by focusing on discourse analysis. [see End Note #1] Discourse analysis relies on the investigation of linguistic and stylistic dynamics explored in a formalist

close reading, while at the same time expanding the range of consideration by emphasizing persuasive impact as well. With its interest in the effects of textuality on us as readers and cultural consumers, discourse analysis is also free to treat all cultural texts which could include inaugural speeches, TV commercials, and rap music with the attentive gaze we might traditionally lend to Shakespeare, according to the needs of the exploration. Most importantly, it emphasizes an awareness that meaning is generated from interpretive frameworks, based on certain assumptions. Thus, rather than aiming at the truth, a discursive analysis examines the ways that meanings are made possible or excluded according to one's frame of reference.

By providing a way to apply literary critical analysis to other disciplines and texts, such as discourses and dialogues encountered in the service experience itself, a discursive analysis allows me to integrate otherwise diverse subjects while training students in close reading. My latest course, for instance, Literature and Social Violence, combines literary narratives with sociological studies revolving around major issues associated with social violence in our culture today: racism, gang culture, domestic violence, homophobia. This combination fulfills some of my own long-held yearnings as a teacher to bring the advantages of different disciplines to bear on subjects that the class might find both urgent and mysterious, such as gang culture. The intensive personal engagement and evocative language made possible through literature can be complemented with a structural analysis of overarching socioeconomic influences and forces potentially at work. Thus, the understanding of racism made possible by Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* and its incisive analysis as to the economic facts and social attitudes responsible for decimated inner-city schools gains a very personal dimension through the internal narrative of the reactions of a young African American girl under the dehumanizing eye of a white shopkeeper in Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye*. These cross-disciplinary advantages work in other ways as well. While the social sciences offer the persuasive power of empirical credibility, theories of causality, and the kind of satisfying statistics one can use to argue for one's social priorities, literature can explore a range of approaches in one page psychological, social, mythic while also keeping us open to an awareness of the potential insufficiency of any explanatory strategy.

Perhaps the most salutary aspect of discursive analysis is that it allows for critical sophistication in regard to both the class texts and the students' volunteerism. Even as the class deals with the emotional impact of their service experience and the dramatic portrayals from literature and sociology, we strive not to grasp at an omniscient conclusion drawn from adding up different approaches. Rather, the course stresses awareness of how dependent any kind of knowledge is on certain premises, rhetorical strategies, and, inevitably, blind spots and omissions. This aspect of discourse analysis can be a bit confounding for the students at first. Trying to deal with the impact of gang violence while also looking at stylistic elements, persuasive strategies and the provisional quality of our conclusions can seem a disorienting array of tasks. At the same time, though, their service experience tends to expose the damaging effects of oversimplified views which are glossed as truth, when such truths are often merely unchallenged, pre-packaged judgments. As the students start to trace the ways in which these culturally cultivated blind spots are created and maintained by certain kinds and aspects of discourse, they become tremendously eager not to repeat that obliviousness in their own process of understanding. It generally takes only a few weeks into the course before I am confronted by students demanding, *What about our discourse? Shouldn't we be examining that?* And, far from leading to the sense of futility or meaninglessness one might fear, this awareness seems to have the opposite effect, as one student made clear in her final paper about educational process:

Through the way our class has learned, I have realized many things about education. It seemed that everything was challenged. We broke down stereotypes and we broke down the new ones that emerged as we

did. This process of questioning all and questioning the questions is what I found most meaningful.

Critical Theory and Discourse Analysis

My other course Critical Theory and Discourse Analysis is perhaps even more challenging of our assumptions about and processes of meaning making. This dreary title was chosen to alleviate the fears of a course committees at a time when service learning was still suspected of lacking rigor. The course deals with questions of language and the instability of interpretation. It starts by tossing students, who often have no literary critical background at all, into post-structuralist theory, with a particular emphasis on deconstruction. This approach asks them to regard any grounding or essential truth as a linguistic construction. This premise often creates an initial identity crisis for talented seniors, many of whom spend the first part of the course fighting off the suspicion they have lost their minds, or at least their IQ's.

Deconstruction looks at what has been excluded or marginalized by the reigning cultural discourses and ideologies in the service of their preservation. One way to the open up such strongholds is to emphasize that linguistic meaning is an inherently unstable process which we hold in place by asserting arbitrary dualisms of superior/inferior, such as mind/body, reason/emotion, male/female, white/black, and on it goes. Once we can see those violent hierarchies, as Derrida would call them, as discursive constructions based in the power of vested interests and cultural habit, we have a little more room to flex our critical muscle and to think about rearranging some of that cultural furniture into a potentially more helpful, even liberating, form.

To avoid the problem of merely valorizing our own objections to the present way of things, thereby only replacing a previous hierarchy of dominance with our own preferred version, in the second half of the course we move from literature to the deconstruction of texts which seem to rely on some of the truths the students especially favor (as do I), such as those founding many ecological, animal liberation, and nonviolent philosophies.

Although this may sound like an Oresteian exercise in small learning through much suffering, there are actually two great and continually surprising joys in this class. The first comes as students start to see that their sense of meaningfulness is not nailed to an insistence on a fixed or unassailable meaning, and that they are more discerning and playful readers accordingly. The second, which has a good deal to do with the success of the first, springs from their service experience. There, they often encounter the conceptual point so important to deconstructive theory, i.e., the problem with undeniable first principles and the hierarchies they support and enforce is that they inevitably exclude or trivialize other possibilities and people, whether intentionally or inadvertently. In other classes the ramifications of such a recognition might be difficult to elucidate. But in this class the process and effects of marginalization take on concrete dimensions, when students find how difficult it is to reach the homeless shelter, now shoved to the seedy edge of town; or share the anxieties of an overweight African-American female attending an affluent white high school; or watch the Chicana with a broken collar bone whom they drove to an emergency room turned away for lack of insurance. These experiences seem to motivate a strong desire to understand the discursive processes as well as political priorities which allow for and validate such exclusions.

Rewards of Teaching Through Service Learning

My closing confession is that these have been my most rewarding classes in seventeen exceptionally gratifying years of teaching literature and interdisciplinary courses at the university level. The wonderful irony of integrating service and serious study of literature, given my initial fears, has turned out to be that the students volunteer work makes them much more receptive to attentive reading and critical theory. This

effect springs, I suspect, from the destabilization of comfortable conventions that occurs when they are out there with the often heartbreaking complexity of the existential. Far from the dogmatic political correctness I hear so many fears about, these students keep coming to a thoughtfulness that turns my own preconceptions around, especially any notions as to who is the teacher and who is the learner. The following comments, based on a student's experience at a homeless shelter, are a good example. Her insights about our impulses to help the homeless and how, if unexamined, those urges may turn against us made me sensitive to the people involved and to my own assumptions in ways that years of study and the teaching of a seminar on the subject had not.

The homeless, especially when we see that they are a lot like us, can be a startling reminder of our own vulnerability and of how real is the difficulty of the struggle for survival. I understand now that so many who are trying to help may be responding to an unconscious fear and a need to alleviate the guilt of participating in a society that is not responsible to the dispossessed. When this is the case, people want pat answers, quick solutions that will feed our illusion that we are getting it under control. We have a personal interest in eradicating homelessness, and when we are confronted with it we often choose the quicker, panicked response rather than the truly compassionate one. However hideous the plight of homelessness might seem to us, it is the only reality many folks have if we detest their reality we essentially detest them and deny them dignity.

In this kind of questing, newly opened awareness, these students are deeply appreciative of the nuances and complications and contradictions of texts, whether they be from the canon or conversations at the San Juan Low-Income Health Center. The combination of deep concern and sudden uncertainty that these students so often experience seems to encourage an awareness of critical and textual as well as broader cultural issues that makes the classroom a volatile, engaged, and profoundly transformative place to be.

End Notes

1. There are a few task-oriented aspects of the following course designs which I should probably note. Literature and Social Violence is a 3-hour upper-division Humanities major course, and offers 3 additional hours of credit for the associated internship. (Students who cannot afford the 8 hours a week required for an internship can do 3 hours of volunteer work a week, for 1 additional credit. Cultural Theory and Discourse Analysis is an interdisciplinary, Senior Honors Seminar. Because of the emphasis on reading contemporary cultural texts through the eyes of literary critical theory, there are fewer actual literary texts included, although that could easily be changed for the needs of an English Department course. The service element is included in the 3 hours of credit the course offers as a fulfillment of the Critical Thinking core requirement in Arts and Sciences.)

Course Outlines:

Literature and Social Violence

As we make our way through this world of literature, film and research revolving around social violence, please keep in mind that your internship experience is in some ways the most important course text of all. There are thus two unusual emphases in this course:

1. A comparison of the varying premises and effects yielded by different disciplines, as we move from the humanities to social theory and research.
2. A continual, thoughtful synthesis of the class materials, your experience, and other students' insights.

Representations of Overt and Structural Violence: , Poverty, Racism,

You Name It

Session/Topic

1. Introduction
2. The Bluest Eye, Morrison (2 sessions)
4. Structural Violence, Moore (The Last Beating)
5. Internship Discussion
6. Savage Inequalities, Kozol (2 Sessions)
8. Discussion of comparative paper example & An American Tragedy
9. Inequality and Community & The Poor Pay All
10. Internship Discussion

Gang Culture and Crime Discourse

11. Do Or Die, Bing (2 Sessions)
12. Evening Viewing, Boyz N the Hood, 6:15 p.m.
13. Discussion: Boyz N the Hood
14. Crime, Culture, and Political Conflict New Yorker Notes and Comments on the L.A. Riots
15. Paper due and Internship Discussion

Discourses Around Domestic Violence

16. Affliction, Banks (2 Sessions)
17. Introduction to Child-Loving, Kincaid, Homophobia and Coach McCartney s Dream (50,000 red-hot men in Folsom Stadium)
18. Giovanni s Room, Baldwin
19. Articles on Homophobia and Violence
20. Chapter from Epistemology of the Closet, Sedgwick
21. Gandhi the Man, Easwaran
22. Short Essays: All Things Are Connected & A Boiling Issue Long (Very Good) Essay: Sustainable Development
23. Housekeeping, Robinson
24. Within Our Reach (2 Sessions)
25. Class Presentations(2 Sessions)
26. Final Exam Presentations:

Assignments:

Two comparative analyses
 Journal (optional but highly recommended)
 Final paper integrating: comparative analysis, service learning, background of area of service, class materials
 More than two unexcused absences = a grade off (Please don t make me)
 All materials other than books are on reserve in Norlin, including optional readings you may find helpful
 As a learning community, we re here to support, challenge, and find each other extremely funny and lovable, so feel free to express yourself (but no pinching or biting).

Discourse Analysis and Cultural Criticism

(alias: Deconstructing our Culture/Reconstructing Our Lives)

Discourse analysis helps us to investigate the conventions by which we make meaning of our existence. How, that is, do we read the world and the discourses around us, and how does that reading shape our considerations and our actions? Deconstruction pokes around a little further and explores the vested interests or hidden contradictions in an ideological system by looking at that which has been marginalized in the service of its preservation. In other words, if one value is to reign supreme in a culture, what does it have to push to the side in order to hold its place as king of the mountain? And, most fun of all, what would happen if we tried deposing the king and making the outcast the center?

In Western culture, for example, the effort to define the male as a source of power and clarity has often led to the casting of all potential

sources of weakness onto the female, by characterizing women in terms of dependence and unreliable emotionalism. In a similar manner, our positioning of the human as the crown of creation has traditionally corresponded with a view of nature other species as so inferior that we can feel free to make them subservient to our needs and desires. Many emerging influences, however, such as the philosophies of deep ecology and non-violence, as well as the increasingly visible damage to our ecosphere, have urged us to view ourselves as intimately interconnected with each other and all forms of life. Hence, we may want to question those traditional power hierarchies and try out new kinds of relationship based on different premises.

In this class, we ll study discourse analysis and deconstruction as a means of exposing and perhaps shaking up a bit prevalent cultural attitudes toward selfhood and sexual identity, the environment, and other species. As we read books which deconstruct our cultural patterns, we ll try to deconstruct their analytical premises in turn.

An important element of the class will be some outreach work on the part of each student. This aspect of the course is based on the assumption that when we offer our help where it is most needed, we often come to realize on a profound and concrete level what it means to be marginalized by a culture s dominant ideology, and what a pleasure it is to fool around with those boundaries.

Class Requirements:

- Three analytical essays (4 - 6 pages)
- Final analytical/synthetic paper (10 - 15 pages)
- In-class presentations
- Outreach work (Journal optional)

Schedule

Session/Topic

1. Introduction
2. Reading: Political Criticism, Eagleton
How does Eagleton define discourse analysis?
What subjects and texts could be included in the category of discourse ? Why does he see discourse analysis as crucial to our ability to understand and transform our social context?
In what ways does he see the traditional humanities as having succeeded, and also as having failed, in accomplishing the education needed to be responsible citizens?
Anything problematic in Eagleton s premises?
3. Reading: Deconstruction, On Deconstruction, 86-89, Culler
Post-structuralism, Eagleton
According to Eagleton, how are dualistic hierarchies an inherent aspect of language and culture? How have the definitions of gender roles illustrated both the rigid exclusions and uneasy interminglings of terms that characterize ideologies of privilege and dominance?
What does Culler mean by the double movement of deconstruction?
How does that make the deconstruction of a dualistic hierarchy more deeply transformative than a mere reversing of the roles of dominant and marginalized positions (so that it moves beyond what we might call reverse sexism or racism)?
Can you think of other examples of the dynamics described by Eagleton and Culler?
4. Writing and Logocentrism, pp. 89-110, Culler
5. Institutions and Inversions, pp. 156-179, Culler
6. FIRST PAPER: Discursive Analysis of Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals, Cohn
7. Discussion of papers
8. Discussion of volunteer service
9. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Stevenson
10. Reading as a Woman, pp. 43-64, On Deconstruction, Culler

11. A Room of One s Own, Woolf
12. Introduction to Sexual/Textual Politics, Toril Moi
Goodman s article about Kitty Dukakis
13. History of Sexuality, Foucault
14. Second paper: Close Analysis of Introduction to Child-Loving, Kincaid
15. Discussion of Papers
16. The End of Nature, McKibben
17. Discussion of Outreach Experiences
18. Discussion of Third Paper
19. Third Paper : Deconstructive Analysis of Text of Your Choice
(Outreach Discussion in class)
20. Introduction to Animal Liberation, Singer
21. Ecofeminism, Gruen
22. Diet for a New America, Robbins (2 sessions)
23. Gandhi the Man, Easwaran
24. Discussion of Final Papers
25. Incredibly Hard Final Paper Due
Synthesis of research and volunteer experience and discursive
analysis of text related to outreach
Beginning of Class Presentations
26. More Wonderful Class Presentations (3 sessions)
27. Final Exam Period: Presentations and Celebrations

Texts:

Literary Theory, Eagleton (excerpts)
On Deconstruction, Culler
Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Stevenson
A Room of One s Own, Woolf
History of Sexuality, Foucault
Diet for a New America, Robbins
Gandhi the Man, Easwaran

Notes Worth Noting:

More than two unexcused absences will lower your mark a letter (ouch)
Photocopied materials are on reserve in Norlin Library under my name