



We Dare You: Using Themes to Promote Vision and Reflection in Service Learning

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Session Description

How can you set the tone for service learning? For one Communication Skills class at Western Technical College (Western), the answer is “We Dare You!” We introduce three dares to the students (to dream, to succeed, and to make a difference), threading the dares through many assignments and activities. This seminar addresses how we implement the dares and how faculty can use themes to facilitate learning and reflection.

Session Foundations

Ah, those old familiar questions: “When is that paper due again?” “I was out sick yesterday. Did I miss anything?” For many first-year students, navigating the logistics of a college-level course can seem daunting. Add to that the plethora of content in most college-level courses, and it’s easy to understand how students can lose sight of a course’s overall purpose. However, particularly in a service learning course, maintaining an overall vision is central to critical thinking. As Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens explain, “In powerful courses, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (148). How can faculty help students to maintain a vision for the “whole” course and not get lost in “the parts”? One strategy is to begin with a clear theme and to thread it throughout a course.

Themes have the potential to enhance almost every aspect of a course: “Integrated, thematic approaches to instruction deepen the learners’ understanding of the theme they are studying, while also promoting mastery of basic skills and facilitating development of other process skills, such as problem solving, critical thinking, learning-to-learn, teamwork, and other interpersonal skills” (Dirkx and Prenger xii). In essence, by connecting everyday tasks to a wider concept of value to the learner, themes help learners to view course requirements not as obligatory pit stops on a one-way road to employment, but as the vehicles that allow them to explore a complex highway of meaningful degrees and citizenship.

Applying a Theme to a Blended Speech and Writing Course

Written Communication is a three-credit course with competencies similar to many typical freshman composition courses. Speech is also a typical introductory course. We first proposed the notion of combining the two into a six-credit service learning experience in 2003.

Our intent in adding a service component was to use student service experiences as the focus of their speeches and writing. To that end, we weren't particularly concerned about what they were doing for their volunteer experiences (though we did arrange for about a half-dozen community partners to come to the class and present opportunities). The tasks they were performing as volunteers would be connected to writing and speaking through their classroom assignments, not necessarily through the volunteer experiences themselves.

The combined course would help students to see similarities and differences between speaking and writing. Going in, we knew that we would need to weave together three variables: speaking, writing, and service. What we didn't realize when we implemented a theme was that we were adding a fourth variable. Now, in addition to clearly linking speaking, writing, and service, we were also trying to incorporate a theme into the mix.

The theme we chose, "We Dare You!," was really a response to the service aspect of the course; we selected three dares that we could clearly relate to community service:

- Dare to dream—We challenged students to identify their dreams and, over the course of the semester, compare them to those of the people they encountered in their volunteering.
- Dare to make a difference—We dared students to reflect on what it means to make a difference. As the semester progressed, we revisited their definitions, often identifying an expanded notion of how they could make a difference for themselves and others.
- Dare to succeed—What does it mean to succeed in school and in life? That's what we dared students to consider.

As student development researcher Alexander Astin asserts, "While we classroom teachers typically believe that we are dealing only with the cognitive side of student development, the learning process is inescapably cognitive *and* affective" (xi). With Astin's premise in mind, the "We Dare You!" theme allowed us to provide an overall vision of learning that connected the cognitive and the affective in the service learning classroom.

While we had a notion of how the dares applied to service, we weren't sure how we would incorporate them into the learning of speaking and writing. Successfully integrating all four variables—speaking, writing, service, and theme—has been an evolutionary process. Only now, after our third go-round with the course, are the connections becoming evident. The following is a chronological synopsis of how the variables play out in our most recent iteration of the course.

We jump in with the dares in the very first class session. Through a series of group activities, students respond to the following questions: 1) What are your dreams? 2) How can you make a difference? 3) How would you define success in life and in this course (other than in the form of a grade)? The intent is to get an initial snapshot of student responses. This sets a baseline for looking at their evolution throughout the semester. The assignments are as follows:

The Introductory Speech (Theme and Speaking)—The first major assignment for the course is a speech where students are asked to introduce themselves by focusing on their dreams, their views on making a difference, or their vision of success.

The Informative Essay (Theme, Service, and Writing)—The introductory speech is followed by an essay where students research and report on the organization for which they are volunteering. Students incorporate the dares from the perspective of the organization.

The Informative Speech (Theme, Service, Speaking, and Writing)—This speech, based on the informative essay, addresses the similarities and differences between speaking and writing. The focus on their service experiences and the dares carry over from the informative essay.

The Narrative (Theme, Service, and Writing)—This writing is, essentially, a “day-in-the-life” piece, as students create a typical (or not so typical) day in the life of someone who works for, or is served by, their community partner. Again, students are asked to incorporate glimpses of their subject’s perspectives on “The Dares” into the narrative.

The Volunteer Fair (Service, Speaking, and Writing)—In lieu of one of the classroom speeches presented in a traditional section of the course, students coordinate and participate in the college’s annual volunteer fair. This includes preparing written promotional materials and representing their community partners at the fair.

The Persuasive Speech (Theme, Service, Speaking, and Writing)—The challenge for the persuasive speech is to take a stand on an issue of importance to their community partners. Writing skills are emphasized in the preparation of outlines, and the research and documentation processes follow the same approach used in the informative essay. Describing dreams, explaining how their position on the topic will make a difference, and helping the audience visualize success pull the theme into the assignment.

The Reflection Essay (Theme, Service, and Writing)—This essay asks students to look back on their semester. What have they observed about their own dreams and those of others? How have they, and those around them, made a difference? Has their definition of success been met and/or altered? These are all questions for students to ponder as they prepare this essay.

Reflection Speech (Theme, Service, Speaking, and Writing)—Based on the reflection essay, the reflection speech again allows students to recognize similarities and differences in speaking and writing. Theme and service carry over from the reflection essay.

In addition to the major assignments described above, students also complete journals or logs (using a form provided). Guided writing activities allow students to reflect in a less formal, more free-flowing style. On the speech side, a series of speech analysis assignments have students watching some great speeches (some famous, some not so famous) and responding to prompts that encourage them to appreciate the qualities of the speaker as well as incorporation of the dares.

To truly be effective, a theme must be woven into both the subject matter and the service component of a course. Through careful planning, a theme can be integrated into almost any service-based course.

Works Cited:

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