

Excavating the Mystery of Becoming a Writer through Service Learning

Students Realizing Their Identities As
Writers and Agents of Change Through
Service Learning Projects In Their
English Courses

Thursday, May 21, 2009 @ 3:30-4:30 p.m.



Presented

by:

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As educators, we believe that experiential learning propels students into spaces engemmed with the possibilities of self-discovery as they acquire subject knowledge and develop skills. As David Kolb writes, experiential learning “involves transactions between the person and the environment,” (1984). Guided into the dark and mysterious spaces that lie at the intersection of self and the academic knowledge, their direct encounters with curriculum topics become tools of discovery, recovery, and reinvention of self. They emerge, potentially, so we hope, with a firmer grasp of self that is not only new, but critically aware – hence transformed. Service learning is a pedagogy rooted in theories of experiential learning; course design and development praxis are tied to the notion that experience is the basis for learning and that critical reflections on the transactions that between learner and context produce cognitive development and psycho-social changes. Service learning specializes to placing a focus on civic responsibility and community-centered activism. Pedagogy directs students on a quest to find a better understanding of their role as citizens and participants in the community—both local and *writ large*. This presentation will explore how two service-learning projects designed and carried out by three Liberal Arts faculty at Baton Rouge Community College created an environment where community college students could take on roles as writers/authors, advocates, and agents of social change while completing service learning requirements. We believe, that as students took on the behaviors and skills associated particular types of authorship, they rehearsed the

possibilities of taking of roles and identities they may otherwise have excluded from their social imagination.

Two Authorship Projects

Beginning in the fall of 2008, two service projects propelled students in American literature and English composition courses to discover for themselves the transformative possibilities that lie in the realm of formal authorship. The first of these projects was conducted in an American literature class. Students were assigned to research and write about influential African American writers that had largely been excluded from the literary canon in the past. Students were then asked to compose biographies for use in a local museum of African American history. Their work involved inviting critique and reflection about the period of voicelessness that was symptomatic in the domain of American literature for marginalized persons and the sometimes explicit exclusionary tendencies of American history. Students were encouraged to ask questions that challenged the presumptions of literary history and their place/role in recognizing African Americans as American authors and players in the field of history. Students discovered how vital writing was to protecting and disseminating the history of American literature.

The Welcome Basket Project

A second service learning project was designed as part of a response to a request from a community partner to address Post-Katrina effects in our community. Located some 80 miles from New Orleans, the city became the epicenter of displaced people

and the college the sole home of many young displaced Louisiana residents. Named the Welcome Basket Project, this service learning project featured an effort to ease the transition of the newest residents of the city. Four principle activities were associated with the project: writing letters, operating the food and provisions drive, composing and translating publicity flyers, and preparing the welcome baskets. Students in an English composition course were asked to read and listen to selected texts that depicted the travails and anxieties that beset typical refugees and immigrants. Through journal writing exercises and discussions they expressed their knowledge, or lack thereof of the role that refugee services agencies play in the community. Reflection activities then guided the students to question and comment on the prevailing attitude towards “outsiders” and the manner in which they have been treated in the local community. Composition students, some of which were actual refugees from Hurricane Katrina/Rita, were called upon to rethink and overcome prevailing xenophobic tendencies and take on the role of “welcome agents.” Spanish and English students, as well as members of the International Student association supported a campus-wide service project to host a collection drive for immigrants, create letters of welcome and goodwill, and to design/compose a “welcome basket” flyer. Through engaging in this type of authorship, students were then inspired to trace the origins of ideas about immigrants and supplant their reactions with the rich tradition of southern hospitality that they hold dear.

A review of student writings produced in the course of carrying out this project indicate that service learning helped to create an enriched learning environment. By enriched, I mean loaded with the meaning, opportunities for critical thinking, personal

expression, and for connecting composition writing to practical, real world issues.

Jordan, a bright young student who remained only lightly tethered to the class for most of the semester, demonstrates some of the passions that arose when the topic of immigration was raised. In his welcome letter he offered a gusty dose of patriotic spirit with his reassurances to a new arrived family. He focused on a notion of a family arriving from war-torn Sudan He wrote:

I can reassure you that America is a great place, full of freedom of choice and opportunity. I honestly cannot relate to you about how the living situations are in your home country. But I can tell you that myself, as well as other Americans, are doing many things to help better the situation in your home country. We are doing positive things like sending money, supplies, and even support in the form of missionaries, church groups, and even armed forces to help protect you in certain situations. (Jordan N.)

In contrast, another young author composed a letter that expressed her personal expertise in the arena of immigration. Shirin M. was a recent immigrant from the Middle East, having been in the country only two weeks before taking my course. Shirin's fervor was unrestrained and insightful about the power of the assignment and the service project in general. She wrote:

In my opinion, a welcome letter can make a difference in the life of one person. A letter can make a difference by affecting the thoughts and feelings of its reader in a positive way. A welcome letter can be informative or instructive. However, I know that the eyes of an immigrant, more than anything, seek relaxing and hopeful words in a letter. I know it by experience. The assignment of writing a welcome letter reminded me of my first days in the United States. I was tired and stressed. Also, I missed my relatives and friends had many negative thoughts and feelings. In addition, I had a hard time deciding whether to stay here or return to my country. Then, I met people who tried to make me relax. It was the hopeful and encouraging effects of these people which kept me here. Their words gave me energy, warmed my heart, and made a difference in my life. Since that time, I was looking for a chance to affect the feelings of a person in the same way. I think that this is the best way I can appreciate what those

people did for me. The assignment offered me an opportunity to give what he or she needs: the hope that can help him/her move on with his/her new life. I believe that by doing so I make a positive difference in the life of that immigrant.

Shirin's words affirm the fact that the service learning project could achieve both its goals: to affect the heart of a stranger and to give composition students a relevant reason to want to become better writers. I believe that what students discovered, beneath the ear candy of nationalism and even regional spirit—was the precious jewel of authorship: words matter, and to sometimes they matter a lot.

Finally, service activities were used to support students' preparation for the exit exam. Service work conducted outside of class was scheduled prior to the exit exam period. Composition students reported for service at a time outside of the class period to build collection boxes, decorate them, and install them at locations across campus. Some collection boxes had been installed previously by our partner in this service learning project: Ana Boone's Spanish 101 classes. Students collected the materials already donated and hauled them across campus for inventory and storage. This time was used not only to train them for their tasks, but to apply what they learned about the writing process to physical tasks, like wrapping a collection box, or designing a flyer. As service activities were completed students were informally assessed on their readiness for the exam. For example, the notion of prewriting was compared to with the first steps taken for box preparation and flyer design, whereas paper submission—the final act of writing a composition, was discussed in terms of its comparison with the act of finally installing the finished collection boxes onsite. In this way service learning

became an integral part of their preparation to take a final exit exam. It was during this period students asked questions and I was able to talk to them and connect with them before the dreaded exam.

The Welcome Basket Project yielded many more examples of intriguing and fresh compositions from my students and insights about composition pedagogy. At this time I will state that after reviewing the materials and writing pieces compared my prior composition classes, the results appear distinctively different. For one, service learning transformed our regular writing class into one that was project-based: students worked collaboratively towards a clear set of objectives. This gave their work a kind of focus that they maintained through the end of the semester. There was, I want to say a hunger for meaningful assignments. Second, their voices (and I mean this in a Bakhtinian sense), became authoritative, if not powerful because of the nature of the assignments. It seemed clear that every student had a position they wanted to take—yet each remained quite flexible after engaging in the stories of homegrown bigotry, harassment, and exploitation, exactly because they conflicted with the values they held dear. Southern hospitality, it turned out, was a great opening for discussion and a point of contrast for discussions about the differences between orality and writing, for example. I speculate that through engaging in writing that invested in their identities as knowers, hosts, bearers of the cultural standard and lead actors in the future of their community, students gained a sense of authority. Further, by completing real assignments grounded in real world activities, English students were compelled to trace the origins of their ideas about immigration and supplant their negative reactions or sense of apathy with

instead an ethic of civic responsibility and the indigenously cultivated ethic of care and altruism evinced in southern hospitality.

The Welcome Basket Service Learning Project represents but one of many different ways that writing instructors can create enriched learning environments that allow students to realize the power of their words. In the presentation to follow, Assistant Professor Bea Gyimah will discuss yet another approach to service learning that authorized students to write compositions in service to the community. Like the Welcome Basket Project, students were given the option to complete service work to benefit an agency and a specific cause. As you shall see, among the many jewels she excavated in her first service learning project experience, was the opportunity to witness her young writers become published writers. The Welcome Basket project also involved translation Additional involvement of a couple of Paired with the work

It is our finding that combining service learning and authorship generated a context for self discovery and personal agency for our community college students. Faculty interactions led to reflections that drew into relief the many commonalities between the two distinctive projects: a service project for a museum which called upon young writers to take the role of writer and a service project for Catholic Charities which called upon service learners to reject the nationalistic and exclusionary responses to increased immigration, and instead, take up the role of "agents of welcome."

The Museum Support Project

Students in Bea Gyimah's American literature and English composition courses discovered for themselves the transformative possibilities that lie in the realm of formal authorship. This project was conducted in an American literature class. Students were assigned to research and write about influential African American writers that had largely been excluded from the literary canon in the past. Students were then asked to compose biographies for use in a local museum of African American history. Their work involved inviting critique and reflection about the period of voicelessness that was symptomatic in the domain of American literature for marginalized persons and the sometimes explicit exclusionary tendencies of American history. Students were encouraged to ask questions that challenged the presumptions of literary history and their place/role in recognizing African Americans as American authors and players in the field of history. Students discovered how vital writing was to protecting and disseminating the history of American literature.

Currently, Bea Gyimah's African-American Biographies Series has been widely received by both the institution and the public at large. Recently, Gyimah's students were recognized by the chancellor, Dr. Dorsey, and Vice Chancellor Ebersole, at Baton Rouge Community College's Recognition Ceremony. Prior this ceremony, the students were invited to have their thoughts concerning the impact of this project recorded on film by the BRCC Performing Arts Department. Besides this ceremony, the students were congratulated for their efforts at the BRCC Horizons Service Learning Recognition

Ceremony. Moreover, the students' accomplishments were also applauded with signed certificates from Senator Sharon Weston Broome on behalf of the Louisiana Senate.