

# **Engaging Humanities: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Composition and Service-Learning**

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## **Abstract**

Service-learning has the potential to enhance learning outcomes for composition students. In an interdisciplinary general education program structured with learning communities and shared readings, service-learning ties together diverse themes evident in the humanities and social science-based curriculum while promoting self-awareness, community consciousness, teamwork and life-long learning.

## **Introduction**

At California State Polytechnic University, Pomona first-year students can select from two general education options to cover lower division humanities and social science requirements: the first has a traditional structure in which students select from a list of course options in lettered categories. The second option, Interdisciplinary General Education (IGE), is a series of eight courses spanning two and a half years in which subject matter is viewed as inextricably intertwined: history, literature, composition, and other disciplinary perspectives

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are all lenses through which students learn to articulate their own voice. As Dorman and Dorman note in their essay “Service-Learning: Bridging the Gap Between the Real World and the Composition Classroom,” traditional pedagogies can often produce the opposite of authentic individual voice: “Alienated, our students are sightseers rather than explorers; instead of discovering for themselves, they follow the path laid out in text and lecture, taking notes on what the tour guide/teacher points out” (119). Through discussion-based pedagogy and strategies such as service-learning, IGE attempts to counter this trend.

The program is small, with an average of 150 students entering each year, and thus offers a learning community environment in which students encounter others in their cohort again and again. There are no lectures, tests, or quizzes. Instead, participants sit in circles, large and small, becoming comfortable and intimate with students from majors across campus (an unusual experience for many on a commuter campus of almost 20,000 students), vocal and passionate in their discussions about *Gilgamesh*, *Antigone*, or Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*. Service-learning projects become an additional text which serves as an experiential connective tissue. Amidst it all, students write copiously: from reading reflections, research papers, and annotated bibliographies to creative writing assignments, online discussions and in-class freewrites. Writing is assessed according to a shared rubric developed by IGE faculty.

In this article, we focus on the first year in IGE (a sequence of three courses), which fulfill requirements for freshman composition and eight units of humanities. Teaching in IGE is collaborative in many senses, from the creation of curriculum shared across all sections of a given course. Experimentation is encouraged, with 60-70% of readings constant any given year and the remaining portion open to individual instructors to try out new material from their diverse disciplines, which range from Religious Studies and Folklore (our own disciplines) to English Literature, History, Dance and Chemistry. Courses are often team taught in the truest sense: not by alternating each class session but with both professors in the room at once, in dialogue with each other and with students who call them by their first names. Assessment of new methods occurs regularly, with informal “torch passing” dialogues quarterly over dinner and end-of-year retreats where new readings are discussed and writing prompts

shared. Service-learning has been a pedagogical method used by some IGE faculty since 2004.

### **Service-Learning and the Humanities**

While definitions can vary (for example, see Pritchard's discussion of the ongoing debate in "Community Service and Service-Learning in America: The State of the Art"), in general service-learning can be said to encompass activities which engage students in community service that both fulfills a community need and specific curricular goals. The project should also incorporate opportunity for the student to reflect upon these curricular connections.

As Adler-Kassner et al write in their introduction to *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition*,

Service-learning helps to bridge such divisions by bringing people together with positive common causes and collective tasks that foster communication and social bonds...Composition is one of the first courses taken for most students, and thus provides a crucial opportunity to set a tone and pattern for the whole college experience (4).

Similarly, because students usually enter IGE as first-quarter freshman, it too often sets the tone for what they come to expect of higher education. IGE's mission is to prepare "students to lead globally conscious, socially responsible, productive, satisfying, and ethical lives in a changing diverse world" (IGE website) -- goals that are well-suited to service-learning. Through active-learning (discussion-based pedagogy, service-learning) and reading selections from Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" early in their first quarter, we hope that what students will come to expect from their college experience is a high level of ownership and engagement.

The literature suggests that service-learning experiences in the first year of college benefit students enormously. Summing up the findings of a number of different authors, Gardner notes that outcomes are wide-ranging, ranging from increased civic responsibility to greater self-esteem (145). Yet, while valuable, integrating service-learning into a first year curriculum can be tricky because, as Gardner also notes, "...service-learning for first-year students must not assume skill and maturity levels that typically develop later in college" (Gardner 145).

Nonetheless, it is easy to see why service-learning is an activity that could potentially fulfill IGE's mission to prepare "students to lead socially responsible, productive, satisfying, and ethical lives in a changing diverse world" and to its goal "To contribute to the ongoing development and practice of creative learner-based pedagogy that integrates teaching, learning, service, and research." While it is an apt fit for our mission and goals as well as our individual learning outcomes, it is considered still in the test phases of implementation and has not been universally adopted by all IGE faculty. Some have worried that Gardner may be right in his concern about first-year student readiness. When service-learning was first raised as a possibility, others were worried that for working class students service-learning would amount to "servitude learning."

Indeed, an additional factor that must be considered when working within a public university system that caters to working class students is time. Students often have multiple constraints on their time, from demanding major programs such as Engineering and Architecture to off-campus commitments such as work, family, or long commutes.

The problem of how to incorporate service-learning into the already busy schedules of working students has been noted by others. At Portland State University where the issue of how to integrate service-learning into already busy schedules "remains unsolved" (Williams et al, 101). At Cal State Fullerton's First Year Program, the conclusion was simply that "structured learning communities may not meet the needs of all students in a highly diverse student population" (O'Byrne & Alva 123).

Other strategies involve structuring service-learning programs carefully so that "the hours required for a service-learning course not exceed those of a traditional course" (O'Connell 59) and preparing students by making expectations clear in the course syllabus, even "blocking out class time for the service experience" (Hatcher, Bringle & Muthiah 84).

Because of the multiple demands placed upon our students, it was clear our courses had to incorporate a certain amount of flexibility. This meant negotiating with the agency, a local historical society (The Historical Society of Pomona Valley), to determine a project that could be fruitful to their goals yet limited in scope. For example, one of the needs first identified for the Society was for docents to guide tours of their historical sites. Unfortunately, while this

might be a good match for the curricular goals of the course and a good match for the agency, it was impossible to train and implement docents in a ten-week quarter. The time spent training them would not justify the short time they would be able to serve, either for the students or the agency. In the end, we decided that the collection of oral histories would meet the agency's needs, the learning outcomes of the first IGE course in the sequence (IGE 120: Consciousness and Community) while offering flexible scheduling of the service opportunity to accommodate the diverse demands placed on students.

It was also a good match for the faculty member who would be implementing the project, a folklorist by training. Part of what makes service-learning successful is not just the match between the course content and the partner's needs, but also the match between a faculty member's service and research interests. Service-learning can involve a significant investment of a faculty member's time, but with an appropriate match, it contributes to career goals by intertwining the three elements faculty tenure decisions are usually based upon: teaching, research and service. In effect, it saves rather than costs time. The pairing of a folklorist with a local historical society builds upon larger national precedents going back several decades. Tracing the "modern historic preservation system in the United States" to the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act, Loomis notes that "Although historic preservationists concentrated at first on the need to save sites and properties of unquestioned architectural merit, their thoughts were open to the importance of addressing cultural resources in a way that included folklife" (Loomis 184). The 1966 act provided renewed support for the goals of local societies like this one, which was incorporated in 1916. Indeed, the history of the Historical Society of Pomona Valley parallels that of public folklore in more ways than one - their first major restoration project in the late 1930s, the Adobe de Palomares, was funded by the Works Progress Administration. In 1939, Bess Adams Garner published *Windows in an Old Adobe*, a fictional account of life on the rancho based on oral histories collected from surviving family members. In it, she documents folk remedies, foodways, celebrations, and other aspects of folklife. Of course, such popularizations and literary treatments by community scholars have long been a source of controversy among folklorists (see, for example, Robert Baron's chronicle of "Postwar Public Folklore and the Professionalization of Folklore Studies"). Nonetheless, both in content and context, this service-learning project provided the faculty member in question to pursue her personal passions and interests while also benefiting her students.

The catalog description for IGE 120 reads: “First knowings; origin of consciousness, myth, symbol, performance, and ceremony; prehistory and patterns of living, making of meaning; university experience” (IGE website). Adopting a folklore fieldwork assignment as the service-learning project allowed students to explore “patterns of living” and the “making of meaning” in local history, helping them to understand the larger community which the university is situated in and explore what it means to be a university student in that community. The students would interview citizens of Pomona and, by interviewing complete strangers, they would begin the process of understanding how to relate to people different from themselves. This also helped students to feel truly a part of Pomona beyond our campus, crossing ethnic and intergenerational lines. As one student stated, “Everyone has a story or a life-lesson worth sharing. If there is anything one can take from interviewing a complete stranger, this is it” (Pomona Oral History Project website). This personal approach would serve to humanize later readings, where we deal with unfamiliar cultures and ways of knowing, providing a real-life parallel to the lessons learned from such required course texts as Horace Miner’s “Body Image Among the Nacirema.” The course would start with a newly added reading that tied together the mythic past with the historic and local, J. Shorb deBarth’s turn of the century speech “Address at the Unveiling of the Goddess Pomona,” which intertwines civic pride in the early days of the city with the myth of the goddess that gives it its name. Other readings chosen to supplement core texts included a booklet on fieldwork techniques (Bartis ) provided by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and transcriptions of family stories collected at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (Zeitlin et al). These provided the groundwork for collection methods students would use as well as concrete examples of they type of content they would seek from their interview subjects. Along the way, students tie together themes that emerge from their interviews with themes in the readings in their weekly reading response papers, learning how to make connections between material from diverse sources and integrate them into coherent short form essays. This builds until the completion of the project when they write a longer format essay that asks them to demonstrate these skills in a profile about their interview subject and the interview process.

After teaching the course for the first time, a website, [PomonaFolk.org](http://PomonaFolk.org), was developed as a means of showcasing the work students did and sharing it with the larger Pomona community. The project could then serve not just our curricular needs or the agency’s needs but the local community as a whole. It

also functions as a means of recruiting new participants for the Historical Society's oral history project.

The second course in the first-year IGE sequence is IGE 121: Rationalism, Revelation and Enlightenment in the Ancient world. This course builds on the themes of community and research and writing skills gained from IGE 120, taking the subject matter into the ancient world while at the same time seeking common threads that connect modern students to antiquity. The catalog describes the course as dealing with the following: "The nature of tragedy; the ways of warriors, prophets, tyrants, philosophers, and citizens; ethics, convictions, and the sacred." The main themes that arise out of the course address the human and community encounter with the realities of life and questions such as: What is the origin of the world? What is justice (divine and human)? What is the nature of suffering? How do individuals and groups face their own mortality? And, ancillary to this, how do we understand our dead?

The service-learning experience designed for this class marked a continuation of our department's collaboration with the Historical Society of Pomona Valley. The service-learning assignment eventually designed for the course arose out of many conversations with a board member of the Society. With no paid employees, it is an organization of volunteers that functions almost entirely on the tireless dedication of a few core members. After seeing the nearby Spadra Cemetery, under the charge of the Historical Society, that was so close to campus and so needing a thorough cleanup, some key texts of IGE 121 crystallized. Course texts *Antigone*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *the Popol Vuh*, and ancient tomb inscriptions, all dealt with death and honoring the dead, so the coordinating faculty member for this course decided to pull these themes out and ask students to ponder these while they cleaned up the cemetery. As in all service-learning endeavors, success can only be achieved when community engagement is firmly linked to course objectives (Eyler and Gyles 183). In IGE, interdisciplinarity is also an important methodology by which students are taught to see the world. Thus, bringing in a service-learning methodology added richness to the course which was already drawing from textual analysis, visual arts, theater, history, film studies and the like. The trick was to make it meaningful rather than just for bringing another discipline for the IGE arsenal.

Thus, to integrate the experience and maintain balance, students read texts on the dead during class days while we cleaned up the cemetery on weekends.

Students spent half of the course without any service-learning obligations in the curriculum at all. The service-learning component of the course was, in a sense, a culminating event for the course, however, especially since it dealt with ancient and modern attitudes toward death, the dead, and places for the dead. In the first week of the cemetery activity, students read Sophocles' *Antigone*, which deals with a young woman struggling with her obligations to her dead brother to bury him under ancient Athenian funerary conventions, and her debt to the king who banished her brother and commanded him to be left unburied as a traitor. Antigone decides her duty to the dead overruled that of the state, leading to her own death. This strong sense of obligation to the dead is extremely difficult to teach in a classroom filled with freshmen who have often never set foot in a cemetery. Going to Spadra Cemetery made that fact a reality for students. This and other texts emphasizing the presence of the dead in the imaginations of ancient peoples became more palpable for the students as they watched as their sweat and hard work two hours a week for three weeks produce a clean place for the dead out of a mass of weeds, broken glass, and graffiti.

The writing assignments for the course were varied and numerous. All asked students to reflect on the service-learning experience from perspectives learned in the classroom as well as their own understanding of the undertaking. When done with the day's work, students filled out assessment forms asking them to reflect on their work caring for the space for the dead and, specifically, how it may have tied into a reading, film or discussion in class. Weekly writings while we were doing the fieldwork also asked students to read and reflect on readings in light of their work at the cemetery. The final project asked students to synthesize the unit's readings with the service-learning as a whole in writing and other creative ways that asked students to create their own meanings.

From the perspective of the Historical Society we were there to weed, pick up trash, clean off graffiti, and haul away the garbage. For the students, it was caring for the dead by cleaning their space. Since it was a cemetery closed to the public, very few people ever went there (at least, those officially granted permission). The work was essentially for the dead. But it was also for the living in Pomona, even if they were not allowed in for the most part since, as the ancient texts demonstrated, a healthy concern for the dead promoted the overall health of the community.

Like the folklore fieldwork project in IGE 120, this project was particularly well suited for the faculty member in charge, a religious studies scholar. The study of religion is a relative newcomer to service-learning. The primary association in religious studies, the American Academy of Religion (AAR), does not have a regular session addressing it as a topic. Of course, sectarian organizations and parochial schools have had a charge to help the community as central to their pedagogy. This is particularly evident in those groups that espouse religious missions such as Liberation Theology. These institutions of learning, however, have committed themselves to not only helping the community, but also have placed missionary work and their own brand of Christianizing zeal at the forefront of their public service (Glennon 10-13). A public university, such as Cal Poly Pomona, must have as its core value in service-learning to meet the community on its own terms; to try to equip it with tools and resources for its vital trajectory, and not attempt to strip it of its own cultural identity. This way, students will learn to see the value in the community's worldview and not try to change it into something the students or professor sees as better. From a disciplinary perspective, the goal for a thoughtful approach to service-learning "should take account of, and raise questions about, the disciplinary and institutional context in which it is practiced" (5). This situation also rises many complicated questions such as "Who speaks for the community's best interest?" Connecting students to community partners makes the university an arm of the partners' mission, whether or not it is a perfect fit or not.

This became an issue when we discovered that Spadra Cemetery was in use by members of the Pomona community without the sanction of the proprietors, the Historical Society of Pomona Valley. Some visitors were certainly up to no good as evidenced by the myriad layers of broken beer bottles that peppered the cemetery, the graffiti, and the drug paraphernalia left behind. There was, however, evidence of people coming to honor the dead with candles and votive offerings. There was also a long and fascinating ghost-lore connected to the place as indicated on internet chat rooms that Spadra Cemetery was a potent locale for communion with spirits of the dead. As a scholar of religion, the faculty member in charge saw this activity as the healthy expression of popular religion connecting back to the ancient world and the very texts we were studying. The Historical Society lumped all who entered without their specific permission to be trespassers and vandals. As a whole, we agreed to help support their wishes to keep the cemetery off-limits. The issue of "intruders" did in fact

become an interesting ancillary side-discussion for the class who pondered who had rights to enter and practice “religion” there. This helped bring the discussion from the dead to the living. Thus, in an unexpected way, students were confronted with the question about the place, not only of Spadra Cemetery in Pomona, but of cemeteries and other spaces for the dead in communities across time and cultures. This made one student ask (in so many words): when do property rights trump a timeless and cross-cultural impulse to commune with the dead?

In *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*, Thomas Deans parses three paradigms for writing in service-learning: writing *for* the community, writing *about* then community, and writing *with* the community. The two classes highlighted in this essay fall under the first two paradigms. Writing down oral histories, students write for the community and “learn nonacademic writing practices and reflect on differences between academic and workplace rhetorics” (Deans 17). Also, “Students reflect on service experience to gain cultural awareness of community needs” through preserving its local history and “provide needed writing products for agencies,” namely those histories. Both service-learning assignments from these classes ask students to write about the community. For example, the cemetery clean-up activity asks students to “develop critical consciousness and habits of intellectual inquiry and societal critique,” as Deans puts it:

Even though the source materials (including the student outreach experiences) and topic sources (which often emerge from those outreach experiences) for student writing differ from those of most composition classrooms, students express their reflection, analysis, or critique in familiar academic discourses (the journal, the reflective essay, the research paper), and are evaluated according to largely traditional methods of academic assessment. Thus writing about courses tends to advance academic and critical literary goals (Deans 18).

In this way, the service-learning assignments in these two courses become “texts” in themselves that students analyze in light of course material and themes. This experiential text may then make a significant contribution to the overarching goals of the course.

We are fortunate that IGE provides an eight course sequence that allows us to look at learning outcomes as long-term goals rather than limited to a single 10 week period. The capstone course, IGE 224: Connections Seminar, is taken in most students' junior year and asks them to reflect on their IGE experience as a whole, tying together recurring themes with new research in a 15 page essay and creative project. This and other courses in the sequence promise to provide other opportunities to explore how service-learning can complement composition learning outcomes, perhaps eventually expanding to encompass the third model, writing with the community. We hope that Interdisciplinary General Education, in the end, will ask students not only to approach topics through multiple disciplinary lenses but also through multiple methods, both independent and collaborative – and in these ways, their learning is itself very much like the department's approach to teaching: In IGE, students and faculty alike can teach and learn *as* a community, *in* the community and *with* the community.

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