

English Composition and Service Learning: Bringing Life into the Classroom

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Abstract

Although service learning has gone a long way since the mid-1980s when it was practically unknown as a pedagogical practice beyond a closed circle of practitioners, in many higher education institutions service learning still remains a domain of a few faculty who are interested in integrating service learning in their disciplines. While experimenting with teaching English 191 Composition course at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota and searching for a way to relate the abstractions of my discipline to the realities of the world, I stumbled into service learning and created a course that truly convinced me of the revolutionary potential of service learning in transforming the stale educational practice. This article recounts my experience with the course and the lessons I learned from it.

Course Objectives

“The purpose of English 191 is to introduce you to college-level writing, reading, and thinking. By the time you finish this course you should be able to read critically various texts that make up American culture and literature and write about them. Also, the course will help you to make informed judgments based on research as well as interpretation of your personal experience,” explains the standard course description for my freshmen composition course. It is this last part, “your personal experience,” that gave me most trouble. No matter which topics we covered in the course, not all of the students could relate to them. Unfortunately, that rendered interpretation of the personal experience an empty promise.

After studying the topic of violence the semester prior to when I first integrated service learning into my curriculum, I heard from my students that most of the things we read about or watched in the videos do not happen where they live (mostly Minnesota), which for many students means that those acts of violence do not happen at all.

To help students relate to the issues discussed in the course – and violence was one of them – service learning seemed to be the perfect pedagogy. Trying to define service learning for myself and going through literature, I realized that much of literature on service learning records a prolonged debate on what it actually means. In 1990 Jane Kendall (in Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles, 1999) wrote that there were 147 definitions of service learning in literature, which for me was a clear sign that if I did want to teach English 191 as a service learning course in the summer semester, I could get into the definition polemics but should accept something that makes sense to me as a working definition. I ended up with the definition offered by Robert Bringle and Julie Hatcher (1995) of the Office of Service Learning at Indiana University-Perdue: “Service learning is a course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate

in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflects of the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.”

Course Structure

The English course consists of three interconnected major parts: teaching an argument, interpreting images, and analyzing violence in society. The first part of the course introduces students to the Toulmin model of argument. My purpose is to show the students that all language, including the language of visual images, can be seen as an argument. We spend several class periods on practicing making arguments, critiquing arguments, recognizing fallacies, and, more generally, figuring out how to write a persuasive essay.

The second part of the course builds on the theory of the argument and asks students to think more specifically about images in media and how these images can be seen as arguments. We watch Judy Kilbourne’s “Killing Us Softly” and Jackson Katz’s “Tough Guys” through the lens of the argument. The topic of violence is introduced through those videos as well as additional readings, so discussions flow naturally from the material students are exposed to.

By the time we cover the first two parts of the course, I aim to achieve two major goals: teaching the students to critically read arguments (analysis) and to write about them (production).

The third part of the course is devoted to a major research project with the general topic of *Violence Against Women*. To teach the students research strategies, I arrange for special library research sessions (a total of four hours) where a librarian introduces the class to the library, resources, and research process. The lecture is accompanied by a hands-on experience when students practice conducting research on sample topics. This semester Pamela Salela, a librarian who specializes in women’s studies, assisted me by conducting highly productive library research sessions for my class.

Service Learning Project

Having initially outlined the course for myself, I started considering how to integrate service into it. I found it useful to think of service, as Keith Morton (1996) suggests, in the sense of a “text.” As Morton further points out, service is not a traditional text and, most importantly, it is written concurrently with the course, but thinking of it as a text has a number of benefits. “First, it suggests that service is equal to written work in its learning potential,” Morton noted. Second, “the analogy of texts implies that faculty must decide what texts are appropriate for the course and whether they are required or optional” (Morton, p. 282). The analogy of the text fits especially well a composition course where students read and critically analyze texts to be able to produce texts of their own.

Obviously, there are certain limitations in what instructors can select as a *service text*. There are a number of practical considerations involved, including questions such as: Which organizations need this service? How many hours are needed? And, will students be able to make those hours?

Working on the preparation for the course, I found the following principles suggested by Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) and reproduced in the book *Service-Learning in Higher Education*, edited by Barbara Jacoby (1996), especially useful:

Community voice (service learning should aim at meeting the needs of the community);

Orientation and training (students should be provided with information on their service, organization for which they do the service, and the issue);
Meaningful Action (the service should be necessary and valuable to the community itself);

Reflection (this crucial component of the service learning experience should happen immediately after the experience to discuss it in order to place the experience into a broader context);

Evaluation (students should evaluate their learning experience and agencies should evaluate the effectiveness of the students' service).

In coordination with the Service Learning Center at SCSU, I have found a place that needed service and that would be directly related to the *text* of violence studied in the course – Annemarie's Shelter for battered women.

For any service learning project to make sense, it has to be oriented not only towards the students and their learning goals, but first and foremost, towards the needs of the community. What Annemarie's needed was help with cleaning and painting the transitional house belonging to the shelter (transitional house is a place where women can live for a while for a nominal fee after they leave the shelter as a transition to a regular housing situation).

As much literature on service learning points out, good organization is time consuming and requires a lot of energy on the part of the instructor (Mintz, in Jacoby, 1996). Without effective administration, integrating service learning into a course might become just another failed revolution in pedagogy. I am particularly grateful to Judy Gay from Annemarie's shelter and to Eveily Freeman, Service Learning Coordinator at SCSU, who assisted me with service arrangements and with adapting our service to the learning needs of the students. We had several meetings long before I even started working on the course syllabus in which we discussed the needs of the shelter, the needs of the course, and the best ways to integrate service into the discipline. We planned several presentations for the students before actually exposing them to the service. They included Eveily Freeman's presentation on service learning early in the semester and two

presentations by Annemarie's social workers as we went along. This allowed the students ample time to think about our expectations from them and to address possible problems with service learning.

Minor and major organizational problems included time management, transportation, work supervision, and providing a lunch, to mention just a few. For example, several students had class conflicts, since service was arranged for two specific days at a set time. As an instructor, I helped solve the problem with other instructors, in most cases arranging for individual assignments to cover for the missed class. I am happy to say that I met with full understanding and cooperation on the part of my colleagues at SCSU. Although service learning is not institutionalized as a program at our university, individual endeavors are certainly supported by other faculty and administration.

The students were to spend ten hours total (two five-hour days, plus one hour for lunch break) working on the transitional house. Annemarie's provided tools and lunch. Also, on the second day of work, students were invited on a tour of the shelter where Judy Gay talked to them about the history the shelter and showed the facility. In addition, before the actual service days, we had two presenters from Annemarie's who talked about the shelter and the problem of domestic violence and, in particular, violence against children. Part of the presentation was a video – another text the class had to analyze.

Course Outcome

Participation in the service learning project remarkably increased students' interest in the topic discussed in class, and their understanding of the issue. It made the whole learning process more meaningful. While choosing the concrete topic for research papers, students had a very good idea what they wanted to research – unlike a typical class where a lot of students totally depend on the instructor for the topic choice. Research papers also demonstrated personal involvement and allowed students to use their service learning experience to relate to the data they researched.

The goal of the final presentation in class on research project was to allow the students to share with the class how they chose their topic and conducted research. This allowed for more reflection. Thus, for example, one student wanted to research a history of the shelters in Minnesota, but was surprised to find out that the information was almost non-existent. His conclusion was that although domestic violence is one of the major problems in the country, there is an amazing lack of interest to it on the part of the government, and is funded poorly.

Service learning allowed the students to connect all parts of the course into a meaningful whole: analyze texts, view all texts as arguments, produce a critique thereof, and conduct research on the topic to which service learning allowed them to have more sensitivity and understanding.

Reflection

The importance of reflection in learning and in service learning in particular has been acknowledged broadly in the literature on service learning. Hutchings and Wutzdorff (1988, p.15), for example, write that “[t]he capacity for reflection is what transforms experience into learning.” Through class discussion, I tried to encourage the students to think critically about their experience and to generate ideas as a community of readers and writers. Class discussions also offer opportunity for instructors to challenge certain ideas and offer others without forcing any ready-made answers on the students. Probably, the most frequent and important comment they heard from me was that there is no one correct answer to the question asked. Generally, a persistent problem with class discussions in English 191 is that since it is a freshmen class, most of the students are still reluctant to speak in public or, to be more specific, in a college environment to which they are new. That is why students oftentimes prefer journals as a form of reflection. They consider journals a safe place for honest reactions. The fact that this reflection is put in writing is also highly beneficial for the class that essentially is a composition class. One of the students wrote in her journals that, in fact, journal writing was the only form of writing that she liked, and not surprisingly her journals were much longer than the suggested one-page length.

Likewise, although the syllabus required students to have a certain number of journal entries, the number of journal entries in most of the students’ portfolios exceeded the requirement. In fact, one student even made fun of herself and her developing addiction to journal writing.

All students expressed a positive attitude to the service learning project, although for different reasons and in very different ways. For one of the students, the first service day was “one of the funniest days of class ever.” The student explains that it is during the service work that people in class really got to know each other and to interact:

Everyone was having an awesome time and the work was easy even though I don’t even mind work like that. It didn’t even seem like work because we did not have someone over our heads watching us and criticizing us. It was volunteer work and I really enjoyed the feeling I got when I got done. You cannot buy that type of feeling anywhere. There is no price for it. It makes me really want to start volunteering so I can help make a little different in someone’s life. I might apply at Annemarie’s.

This student also mentions how happy he was that people at the shelter appreciated this work.

Although this is a positive evaluation of the experience, it is easy to see that it mostly revolves around the student himself and the way he and other people see him. While this may seem discouraging, most researchers notice that egoism as acting toward the ultimate goal of increasing one’s own welfare with rewards such as feeling a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, gaining skills, and affiliating with others is critical to initial and continued involvement in service (Winniford, et al, 1995). The following

journal entries of the student in the passage above, however, show the progress from what service learning does to the student to how it helps other people: “I and my friend both wanted to help out and make a difference in St. Cloud where we will be living for the next three years. We don’t feel that violence is the answer in families and we should try and change that for the better.” Thus, we can see a movement from egoism to altruism (acting with the ultimate goal of helping others) as a result of a continued involvement with the project.

While most students find the service learning experience helpful in achieving class goals, one student writes that he does not know what this project has to do with the class. Nevertheless he says he is happy to have worked at the shelter, since on his own he would have never done any volunteer work. For this student, service learning did not work out. Enjoying volunteer service has its merits, but within the academic context the purpose of service learning is not to push students into volunteerism but to help them acquire academic knowledge in the discipline through service. However, while for this particular student, academically the class did not bring the expected results (largely owing to absences from class and insufficient time investment in studying), his positive experience at Annemarie’s and his desire to do more work for the shelter was at least one positive outcome of his total class experience.

As an instructor, I was fascinated to see how students’ reflections developed from “the fun class” and “making friends” through thoughts on the poor living conditions of women and children in the shelter to trying to deal with the problem itself. Students start talking about domestic violence and abuse as a social evil, about budget cuts that affect the shelter, about responsibilities of politicians, and about the upcoming elections. As Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles (1999, p. 14) summarize it, “[s]ervice-learning aims to connect the personal and intellectual, to help students acquire knowledge that is useful in understanding the world, build critical thinking capacities, and perhaps lead to fundamental questions about learning and about society and to a commitment to improve both.” Marylu McEwen (1996) cites the following as anticipated learning and development outcomes for the students the following: greater complexity in thinking, ethical commitments regarding themselves, and what they know and believe; greater awareness of themselves as and of their own racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage; greater sense of their place in the United States; increased tolerance and empathy; greater clarity about themselves and their life purposes; and development and maturity of their values. I am happy to say that the design of the course I taught led to most of the above-mentioned outcomes.

There is evidence that students can better analyze a social problem when they combine academic knowledge gained in class with personal experience through service (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 105). That is exactly what happened in the class I taught. One of the most positive outcomes, noticeable to me as instructor, was students’ ability to cope with problems for which there is no obvious solution. Thus, from easy suggestions at the beginning of class that abused women should “simply leave the abuser” students developed a much more mature and informed understanding of the complexity of the issue and of the lack of a radical solution to the problem.

Final Research Project

Part of composition class is teaching students to do a major research paper. The problem I usually confront as instructor is the lack of interest on the part of the students. I can teach them how to do research and I can offer topics that, I assume, should both reflect the content of the course and be of interest to the students. On many occasions I truly felt I can lead the horse to the water but I cannot make him drink. With the service learning experience involved, the students were clearly interested in researching topics discussed in class during the reflection class time. They were given much freedom in choosing the topic of their liking while connecting it to the service learning experience was not a requirement. Interestingly, all the students in class ended up researching a topic that was connected to their service, and in general their final projects were of a better-than-average quality, which I think to a great degree reflects the genuine interest the students had in their research. Another quality common to all of the projects was their more personal character not only in the sense of referring to the service experience and reflection on it, but also in the sense of talking about their own families and communities. Also the papers contained a richer mix of sources, including interviews, recalled experiences of service, lectures, and videos. Thus, service learning helped eradicate the common scourge of English composition classes – the lack of engagement with the material.

Evaluation and Grading

While faculty is often concerned about not being able to observe the service directly, I was lucky to participate in the service project together with my students on both days. Nevertheless, as I mentioned before, students commented on the lack of pressure and explained that nobody was watching them or criticizing. I am happy that my students accepted me in their group as an equal, not as a supervisor, which in fact I was not. Our work was supervised by a person from the shelter.

Another factor that I think contributed to the success of the experience was that I did not grade the service per se. The syllabus explained that since it was a service learning class, participating in the service was a necessary prerequisite for passing the class. However, no particular percentage of the grade was assigned to the work at the shelter. While students were not graded for how well they worked, they were graded for demonstrating what they have learned both from service and from other class assignments, that is they were graded for the work specific to the discipline.

Final Evaluations

Final evaluations for the class demonstrate the overall success of the service learning experience. There is a lot of evidence of the growing social consciousness on the part of the students, and willingness to actively help their community. While I do not want to overestimate students' willingness to do more for the shelter and to volunteer on

a regular basis (not everybody will eventually do it), evaluations convey a feeling of awakening sensitivity to societal needs.

From the thirteen students registered for the class, all but one expressed desire to do volunteer work for the community in which they live. Seven people said they want to contact Annemarie's shelter and offer their services in the coming school year. Two male students who asked the most questions about people who work at Annemarie's during our tour and learned that Annemarie's were looking for male volunteers (to give children a positive example of male involvement), expressed desire to work with the children. In general, students, for most of whom this course was the first college experience, gave a very high evaluation (5 on a scale from 1 to 5) of learning through service, and said they would be willing to take more classes with service involved.

Conclusion

While English composition has often been criticized for working in unreal rhetorical situations (Heilker, 1997, p. 71), service learning creates a very real situation with a very real audience and very real needs. It also gives students ideas they want to research and write about, an asset in a class where the majority declares from the very beginning that they hate to read and to write and are taking this class because it is a requirement.

While I have no doubt that service learning is a beneficial pedagogy, I also understand that it is not successful automatically. It requires a lot of time and effort to make it work. But my experience with a service learning composition class convinced me that the outcome is worth the effort.

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