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## Writing the Ties that Bind: Service-Learning in the Writing Classroom

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*Recognizing, as John Dewey observed, that democracy begins in conversation, the Service-Learning Writing Project views the writing classroom as a place where rhetorical processes and democratic practices naturally converge. Informed by complementary disciplinary conversations in public culture studies and composition research, the project's interdisciplinary curriculum and pedagogical methods seek to shape habits of heart and mind that advance the development of critical discourse skills, the refinement of civic sensibility, and the promotion of students' ethical responsibility for the public good.*

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The Service-Learning Writing Project (SLWP) at Michigan State University is a new program designed to link two strong traditions in undergraduate education at the land-grant university: service-learning, handled through Student Affairs by the MSU Service-Learning Center, and writing pedagogy, the charge of the Department of American Thought and Language with its long tradition of introducing first-year students to critical reading of American cultural texts and writing in an interdisciplinary academic context. Like the growing number of other post-secondary programs around the country being developed to forge links between service to local communities and classroom learning, faculty who teach in MSU's program have gained insights into both the practical management of such learning initiatives and the articulation of their philosophical and ethical underpinnings.

A limited number of sections of the general education courses offered by the Department of American Thought and Language are designated to include a community service component. In these sections, undergraduates engage in critical reading and discussion of American literary and historical texts, in writing academic analyses of the ideas raised in these texts, and in practicing peer editing and revision in small workshopping groups. In addition, the MSU Service-Learning Center, in consultation with project faculty, pro-

vides students in these sections with a choice of placements in Lansing-area community and non-profit agencies and organizations, which we describe in more detail below.

Efforts around the country to integrate service-learning pedagogy into a variety of disciplinary courses have yielded generative conversations about the nature of education, the mission of institutions and their commitments to research, teaching, and outreach, but also about the content of education and the applicability of disciplinary knowledge to various workplaces. The Service-Learning Writing Project is informed by two different disciplinary conversations—civic literacy and composition studies—which share some common historical and philosophical bases but also distinct vocabularies and frameworks. In the following sections of this article, we describe our course in more detail by grounding our discussions in each of these two disciplinary contexts. These disciplinary conversations, however, are not discrete; in our discussion—as in our work—we interweave the two.

### Democracy and the Arts of Public Discourse

Courses such as SLWP-sponsored "Public Life in America" invite students to debate, discuss, question, and critically evaluate a uniquely American value system of civic commitment that is both

uniform and mosaic, reflecting a multiplicity of cultural expressions and practices unmatched by any contemporary society, yet mediated by democratic principles and values ideals embodied in American social and political institutions and the diverse traditions that sustain them. What does it mean, for example, to be a member of the communities in which we live and work—school and classroom, workplace, religious organization, neighborhood or nation? What does it mean to be a citizen in a democracy? How well do traditions of American citizenship serve the complex demands and increased diversity of public life in America? What is the relationship between civil rights and civic responsibilities? What does “service” mean and what does it have to do with democratic citizenship? Furthermore, we analyze the heritages and diverse discourses that inform, complicate, and criticize the values of public commitment. We invite our students to explore values issues in their own lives and the relevance of those issues to American life generally, past, present, and future.

Above all, we encourage our students to question critically America’s civic traditions in preparation for their own service-learning experiences. How, for example, have civic, religious, economic, and social traditions shaped moral life in America? In what ways do those values traditions help to ease, or perhaps even aggravate, the persistent tensions in American life between self-interest and civic duty, individualism and commitment to the common good, entitlements and responsibilities, individual rights and the social contract? How do current debates over values—abortion, Affirmative Action, hate speech codes, gays and lesbians in the military, the Contract with America, the Militia Movement—reflect long-standing assumptions about how to order social life in America? How are today’s communitarian values reflected, or indeed refracted, in the popular media, our educational standards, our role models, our rituals of self-governance, our vocational aspirations, and our tolerance for the growing diversity of American life?

In these courses, students read representative works by those voices who have shaped the communitarian conscience of American civic culture—Thomas Jefferson, Jane Addams, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Dewey, Dorothy Day, among others. And students wrestle with topics that continue to energize debates over democratic values in America: civil rights versus civic re-

sponsibilities, the tyranny of the majority, and challenges to democratic citizenship such as chronic prejudice, persistent inequality, cynicism, self-enclosure, and mass media distortion. Along with students in writing programs across the country which are inspired by a resurgent service-learning pedagogy, Michigan State students take up major writing projects that meet the special needs of Lansing-area public service agencies—projects that have a direct impact on the lives of people in Mid-Michigan, the palm of the Mitten State. Some students, for example, write public service announcements for a regional youth employment center that offers counseling for young persons their age who don’t go to college and are having trouble finding jobs. Another group creates a new descriptive brochure for a non-profit organization that assists individuals with severe physical disabilities and their families. Other student teams draft public service spots for a local TV station, a newsletter for refugees, and a fact-pack analysis of statistics on domestic violence in the Tri-County area.

Like our colleagues at Stanford University, the University of Minnesota, California Lutheran University, and elsewhere, we believe that these community service writing projects help build and refine what Benjamin Barber (1992) considers “the literacy required to live in a civil society” (p. 4), along with the discourse skills necessary for university-level work. Ethically committed students—students engaged, that is to say, in meaningful practices of obligation to others—have enormous opportunity, we’ve discovered, to develop as more proficient writers. As practices of commitment, service opportunities also carry a strong moral valence for students. Service assignments can be points of connection, as Robert Coles (1993) reminds us in his recent book *The Call of Service*, between self and other, moral moments in teaching and learning that yield, Coles says, “an awareness of the moral complexity that informs the choices we consciously make, as well as those we unwittingly make...[A]ll service is directly or indirectly ethical activity, a reply to a moral call within, one that answers a moral need in the world” (p. 154).

One way to describe the SLWP is to talk about its resting on three pedagogical foundations of civic literacy: (1) Rhetorical strategies made available to students through service-learning assignments support effective writing pedagogy. (2) Writing projects assigned to students in conjunction with community service placements advance

higher order academic discourse skills. (3) The combination of writing for a public service agency and the intellectual experience gained through carefully studying primary cultural source materials is a particularly effective way of advancing civic education.

This particular line of inquiry views the writing classroom, in short, as a moral and civic venue, a place where moral sensibility, critical literacy, and the arts of public discourse, leavened by reflective and connected learning, develop hand in hand. Research in language development and composition studies shows, in fact, that language proficiency, critical thinking and reading skills, moral reasoning, and historical and civic literacy develop symbiotically. Linguistic dexterity and virtuosity are now understood to be closely associated not only to cognitive development but to refinements in moral and ethical development as well (see Cooper, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1976; Perry, 1981; and Stotsky, 1992).

#### *Writing Rights*

The SLWP curriculum treats democracy itself as the art of public discourse. The writing assignments that we have shaped in connection with or as preparation for our students' agency placements grow out of classroom discussions and readings that block in a fundamentally rhetorical model of democracy.

Simply put, information in a democracy is disseminated by media—print, broadcast, and increasingly electronic—into the public arena. It is important that the information, notwithstanding its mode of dissemination, remains open and accessible to as broad an audience as possible. That is the burden of the American press. After all, the purpose of information in the public sphere, we often forget, is not entertainment or even persuasion but as a stimulus to discussion and a catalyst for debate. Whether or not the information circulated in the public arena is sufficient for informed decision-making or whether it is colored by ideological or political shadings or whether it is even fit for public consumption is the business of civil debate. That is the burden borne, in turn, by a critical electorate. Such business is conducted in the democratic spaces—the *res publica*—set aside for the cultivation of informed public opinion. Once opinion is shaped in the sprawling marketplace of public debate, it is assimilated by decision-makers who re-debate the issues among themselves and then make laws

and adopt policies which are recycled back into another round of dissemination, debate, and decision-making.

When we asked our students last term to list resources of political information available to us today, within a few minutes we catalogued on the blackboard no fewer than twenty-two easily recognizable media for information transmission that often enter *en masse* into our daily lives. That list ran the gamut from what one might expect—TV, radio, newspapers, opinion polls—to the slightly more offbeat but no less ubiquitous items we have become habituated to: ballcaps and tee shirts, lawn signs, fax machines, blimps, and, of course, the computer upon which we effortlessly hitch rides onto the information superhighway. We then turned to list the venues for public debate and discussion of information. Just as quickly we generated eighteen such forums: editorial commentaries in local newspapers and town meetings, for example, along with open hearings, public platforms, roundtables, televised committee deliberations, electronic town meetings, and other media forums that have proliferated into a staggering array, from pamphlets that anyone with access to a computer can readily produce to more sophisticated channelings of public opinion-making such as video conferences, electronic bulletin boards, and, for the current student generation in particular, a vast and fascinating underground magazine network largely ignored by adults who teach them English and Civics.

What an incredible marketplace of ideas! At first blush, one might think that the libertarian model of civic culture rooted in the yeasty Enlightenment principle that an unrestrained exchange of ideas will eventually spawn truth, produce universal reason, and foster civic virtue is virtually guaranteed by the sheer tidal mass of information accessibility and flow in our free society. Factor into the argument that the nearly unlimited freedom of expression we enjoy today is a recent and fragile development in our political history, and one is likely to conclude that the 17th century poet John Milton's majestic call for the triumph of a Renaissance spirit of open inquiry he envisioned from the spread of the printing press and social revolution has finally culminated in late-20th century America. "Give me the liberty to know," Milton wrote in 1644, "to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties" (Jenkinson, 1992, p. 3).

Yet at the same time, one has the uneasy feeling that our democratic feast has degenerated into

junk food for a distracted, even cynical, perhaps confused electorate. *What* are we bringing to the common banquet table of our public life? Have we crossed or are we crowding that threshold Anna Arendt scribed in the late fifties: a point at which the public realm, she warned, recedes against the ceaseless encroachment of private spheres, spurred by our insatiable appetite for the details of others' intimate lives? Having arrived in the information age, are we able to disentangle, Arendt wondered, the important from the trivial, the relevant from the irrelevant, the public from the private? Has citizenship, in other words, given way to voyeurism? "What the public realm considers irrelevant," she writes, "can have such an extraordinary and infectious charm that a whole people may adopt it as their way of life...[However,] [t]his enlargement of the private, the enchantment, as it were, of a whole people, does not make it public, does not constitute a public realm" (Barber & Battistoni, 1993, p. 61).

In the democratic model just described, for example, an inability to distinguish the dissemination of information from public relations and marketing strategy, the manipulation of feelings, the hard sell, entertainment, or garden-variety propaganda-making threatens to disrupt the democratic process just as surely as a refusal on the part of citizens, reeling from media fatigue, to participate in forums for discussion and debate. Questions of real concern for democracy today have less to do with First Amendment liberties that have driven 200 years of debate over latitudes of free expression, and ought to be focused more critically on whether—and why—the average citizen has become disenfranchised as a player in the public exchange of ideas. *What* are we listening to? Moreover, as Elizabeth Thoman (1992), Executive Director of the Los Angeles-based Center for Media Literacy, asks: "Is anyone out there listening?" Writing shortly after the fires of South Central L.A. had been extinguished and the cameras were busy filming political candidates campaigning amid the rubble, she asks: "Am I being informed about the ways political candidates propose to deal with the problems of society? Do I know how and why issues, programs and policies are shaping the things I care about? Do I believe that my vision for a good society is being articulated and shared by politicians, media commentators and government officials?" (p. 2).

What we have just described is more than a gloss on policy-making processes and problems

in a post-typographic democracy. We have tried to sketch in, rather, an anatomy of argument and an ecology of opinion-making in our body politic. We have offered a discourse model that demands its practitioners—citizens, that is to say—to apply principles and generalizations to new problems and situations, and think independently while incorporating the opinions and perspectives of others. As a rhetoric, democratic processes bring into sharp relief the importance of analytic methods that are the stock and trade of any language arts classroom: evaluating hypotheses and conclusions, for example, or distinguishing between fact and opinion, or formulating critical questions, not to mention the arts of critical empathy and examined self-reflection which are the particular goals of the Service-Learning Writing Project and the aims of good teaching, more generally, across the humanistic disciplines.

One way of describing the writing classroom, we are suggesting, is as a locus of democratic processes *qua* rhetorical practices. The writing classroom, in fact, may be said to be a preeminent site of democratic learning, civil dialogue, and civic training at the university. Teaching the arts of democratic practice and higher order discourse skills are not parallel pedagogies. They are the same pedagogy. As Benjamin Barber (1992) has said of the university at-large: not only does the university *have* a civic mission, "the university *is* a civic mission, is civility itself, defined as the rules and conventions that permit a community to facilitate conversation and the kinds of discourse upon which all knowledge depends. On this model, learning is a social activity that can take place only within a discursive community bringing together reflection and experience" (p. 260).

### *Polling Through Opinion*

We endeavor to devise writing assignments and select agency placements that will initiate students into the democratic/rhetorical model that we reflect on more abstractly in our readings and class discussions. At the same time, we try to capitalize on the advantages of the service-learning pedagogy that Barber highlights in the passage just cited.

In one of our assignments, for example, we asked our students to follow closely a developing story in the local newspaper involving proposed changes to the City of Lansing's civil rights ordinance prohibiting discrimination in the areas of housing, employment, and public accommo-

dition. At issue was a controversial amendment to a city human relations ordinance that widened protected class status beyond race, gender, and religious affiliation to cover height, weight, family, student, or handicap status as well as political affiliation and—the hot button issue—sexual orientation. Our students researched and collected information about the proposed amendment from the local press, including newspaper stories and editorials, special interest group newsletters, and press releases. They solicited position statements from various individuals and organizations that represent the considerable spectrum of opinions over whether the Constitution's guarantee of equal protection under the law extends to classes or groups defined by sexual orientation, including a local gay and lesbian rights organization and members of the religious community who had already weighed in on the debate. Some of our students attended an initial public hearing on the ordinance amendment held by the Lansing City Council where they listened to emotional but generally civil debate among more than 80 citizens who had signed up to speak in council chambers jammed to capacity. Other students followed the debate as City Council deferred discussion to the Human Relations Board for further review. Significantly, one group of students set out to research similar civil rights controversies then embroiling other municipalities and states, including the recent overturning of a gay rights ordinance by Cincinnati's voters and a Colorado initiative to amend the state's constitution and similarly prohibit cities from enacting ordinances such as the one being proposed in Lansing.

It is important to note that our students brought to the debate a fairly solid civic vocabulary and the benefit of perspectives gained from extensive readings and discussions in a course that surveyed the history of civic republicanism in America. In particular, we had already examined the germane constitutional articles which guarantee the basic rights of individuals who may encounter hostile democratic majorities that threaten to run roughshod over them: the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights and, as significant, the equal protection provisions spelled out in the 14th Amendment. We tried to figure out as well what sorts of issues belonged in the public sphere and were, as such, subject to our democratic model, and which matters were best left, as Tocqueville put it, to the precincts of individual privacy. We discussed stories that treated the theme of tyrannical

majoritarianism, like Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" and Ursula Le Guin's turgid "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," along with Herman Melville's durable novella *Billy Budd*. We read the American classics of civic conscientiousness and moral conscience: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and Thoreau's ode to moral integrity and democratic responsibility, "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience." In connection with the matter before the Lansing Human Relations Board, we explored the wrenching case of Joe Steffan, a model midshipman expelled from the Naval Academy in his final semester because of his sexual orientation. And with the help of materials compiled by the Center for Media Literacy, we wrestled with the very special problem of what constitutes civil discourse in a media age. How does one distinguish "argument," for example, from indoctrination, sloganeering, marketing, voyeurism, or doctrinaire propagandizing that otherwise clutter the information marketplace and bombard the public mind? And how important are such distinctions to the serious work of citizenship: the forging of opinion in the service of informed decision-making?

Against that contextual backdrop, here is the verbatim writing assignment we gave our students in connection with the civil rights ordinance:

In his essay "Making Politics Work," Jay Rosen (1992) defines "public discourse" as "the sort of talk a democracy needs...to illuminate our troubles and connect them to broader issues." Public discourse, more specifically, is "open and understandable to all." It "deals with major problems affecting society." It is "conducted in a civil fashion." Above all, public discourse "protects private and intimate matters from the glare of the public realm" (pp. 10-11).

Public discourse, then, is crucial to the democratic model we have been studying: dissemination of information, public debate of issues, and decision-making by elected officials. Polling has become a popular source of information gathering. Public debate of controversial issues and decision-making often rely on information tallied from public opinion polls.

**ASSIGNMENT:** Design and conduct a public opinion poll to help the Lansing Human Relations Board decide whether to recommend to the City Council adoption of an ordinance banning discrimination against people based



on sexual orientation. Keeping in mind Jay Rosen's characteristics of "public discourse," carefully design with your study group four questions that can be answered "Yes," "No," or "Don't Know."

Split up. Walk around campus. Find at least six students, and conduct your poll. Come back to class and tally your answers with others in your study group.

Based on an analysis of your polling results, write a memo to the Human Relations Board. Advise them. What decision should they make regarding the proposed ordinance to ban discrimination against people based on sexual orientation?

Before students left class to conduct their surveys, we were careful to review their polling questions with them. We scrutinized questions according to the four criteria of civil discourse laid out by Jay Rosen. Were the questions *accessible* and *respectful*? Did the questions *connect* the particular feelings often evoked by sexual orientation to the broader issue of civil rights? Would the questions, in other words, carry our students' respondents into the arena of public discourse where informed opinion is forged, or side-track them into a cat's cradle of theological, logical, or emotional entanglements? Would our students' polls elicit information, in short, that would *illuminate* the controversy facing the Human Relations Board? Or further *polarize* it?

After conducting their surveys, compiling and analyzing the results, and later returning to class with their first-draft memos, we asked our students to examine the methodology of their arguments, paying particular attention to the subtle, even invisible links between the questions they initially posed in their student polls and the conclusions they arrived at and explained to the Human Relations Board. We were especially interested in shedding light on ways in which leading assumptions can often skew polling results and thereby misrepresent public opinion. Here are the questions we used to prompt such scrutiny:

1. As a pollster, what kinds of assumptions about discrimination against people based on sexual orientation did you make prior to formulating your polling questions?
2. In what ways are those assumptions reflected in your polling questions?  
By rephrasing your polling questions, could you have gotten different responses from the

students you polled? Select one of your polling questions. Rephrase it. What response is the new question likely to evoke? Explain *how* the new question works to evoke those different responses.

4. What is sacrificed when polls replace other kinds of information in political debate?

After a thorough discussion and review, we then required our students to reconsider their original memos, revise, and resubmit them.

Among the 164 letters stirred into the crucible of public debate by Lansing's Human Relations Board were several written by MSU freshmen, which brought our students full circle in both the civic and the rhetorical processes played out in our democratic model.

### Service and Writing: Pedagogies in Conversation with One Another

In some service-learning courses, the work the students do furthers the cause of the organization. Particularly in writing courses, this arrangement presumes that the authenticity of "real world" writing situations is the pedagogical benefit of the service-learning component. In other courses, the experience in the community serves students' learning. The service placement exposes students first-hand to social issues about which they are studying, and from which presumably they have been previously sheltered. In this case, service in the community serves as material for writing, a source of experience and therefore authority. In still other courses, language is itself the subject of investigation. As students serve the agency with their work, they develop a new expertise: their experience becomes a position from which they are invited to re-compose themselves and their knowledge. They reflect upon and investigate discursive practices in order to better understand how they shape the nature of social issues.

Giles and Eyler (1994) have recently argued that the theoretical foundations for service-learning pedagogy have not yet been fully articulated. They begin that exploration by grounding it in the work of educational philosopher John Dewey, whose work also undergirds much composition theory, although as Fishman (1993) indicates, that grounding is more often tacit than elaborated. While there have recently appeared a handful of articles describing writing classes which incorporate community service, very little has been

written about the ways in which specific theoretical positions in composition studies are furthered by service-learning pedagogy.

Nora Bacon (1994) writes that "Community service can profitably be built into a writing course in at least two ways" (p. 14), citing as examples the programs at UCLA and at USC, which engage students, respectively, in "writing about service experiences ... [and] writing as service" (p. 14). While this distinction does seem to be emerging as a pivotal one in imagining and designing writing courses which use community service, it also may evoke overly simple dualisms, recognized by labels such as expressivist vs. functional. In fact, we believe that there are far more complex and richer ways to weave service-learning pedagogy and commitments with composition goals and theory. Two recent articles, for instance, describe writing courses with community service learning components in ways that problematize the distance between these two seeming poles.

Bruce Herzberg (1994) begins "Community Service and Critical Teaching" by describing the evolution of community service learning in the Bentley College curriculum, from courses in which students worked in soup kitchens and wrote about it, to courses in which students did accounting for nonprofit agencies. Herzberg moves on to assert that neither model necessarily engages students in critical analysis of the issues raised by community service. He agrees with former Campus Compact director Susan Stroud that if service-learning courses do not result in such analysis, "then we are not involved in education and social change—we are involved in charity" (p. 309). But he also claims that the connection between composition instruction and the questions raised by community service about social structures and social justice "is by no means obvious" (p. 309).

Though he does not reference it, Herzberg echoes a central tenet of Dewey's thought. According to Dewey's principles of "experience, inquiry, and reflection" (Giles & Eyer, p. 79), experience in and of itself is not educative unless it is the object of reflective thought and linked with efforts to move beyond individual experience to consideration of larger social processes. For Dewey,

Inquiry...involved problematization of experience, of creating an uncertainty of belief or knowing that 'perplexes and challenges the

mind' (1933, p. 13). Once experience is problematized, then the process of inquiry could occur. (p. 79)

Herzberg goes on to describe his composition course in which students' service is to the agency—they work as literacy tutors at a downtown shelter—but students' writing engages them in inquiry into "the study of literacy and schooling, examin[ing] the ways that literacy is gained or not gained in the United States" (p. 310). In explaining the rationale for the service-learning experience in his writing class, Herzberg writes:

The effort to reach into the composition class with a curriculum aimed at democracy and social justice is an attempt to make schools function...as radically democratic institutions, with the goal not only of making individual students more successful, but also of making better citizens, citizens in the strongest sense of those who take responsibility for communal welfare. These efforts belong in the composition class because of the rhetorical as well as the practical nature of citizenship and social transformation. (p. 317)

In response to what Jane Peterson calls a "new urgency" to develop "students' ability to appreciate cultural diversity and multiple ways of reading and writing" (cited by McGuiness, p. 1), Ilona McGuiness argues that students need to "accept the responsibility of building a knowledge base" about "people who live in circumstances far different from their own" (p. 2) before they can enter into reasonable public discussions about a variety of issues such as questions of social justice. Service-learning placements help McGuiness' students to "achieve the kind of 'distance and objectivity toward their experience'" (p. 4) which, she says, quoting Christopher Burnham, is necessary before "college writers [can] use a wide range of cognitive skills...systematically and rigorously" (cited by McGuiness, p. 4). Explaining her decision to include community service placements in her writing class, she argues that "even the best [instructional materials] still keep students removed from the realities" (p. 2) of the issues about which they are engaged in formulating positions. Given that the goal of her writing class is to learn ways to present ideas "effectively to an audience which include[s] but is not limited to people sharing their points of view" (p. 2), she says, service-learning experiences give students a way to confront and find language for both the differences among people and the common ground that enables them to work together. Thus, in



McGuiness's course, while much of the writing connected to their service work is aimed at helping her students to "articulate their personal values" (p. 5), she works to ensure that the struggle is not only emotional but intellectual: much of the rest of the work, she says, "help[s] focus that struggle in ways that complement the academic goals of the writing course" (pp. 5-6).

In the courses described by these writers, and the concerns articulated by each, we recognize philosophical principles shared by both service-learning pedagogy and composition studies, and which Fishman and Giles and Eyler identify as Deweyan: (1) students learn best when they are actually involved in their own learning; (2) students learn best when the learning project is seen to have intrinsic interest and not merely as an exercise; (3) writers develop language and discourse skills best by writing for a variety of audiences, not only for the teacher as examiner or evaluator; and (4) experience is educative only if it is structured by the teacher through "the process of problematization and inquiry, and the phases of reflective thought" (Giles & Eyler, p. 80). In Fishman's claim that composition studies does well to recognize a strong strand of its philosophical thought in Dewey's idea that community requires common experience and purpose, we recognize a position embodied by service-learning pedagogy. And when Fishman claims that it is the way to whom we as writing teachers should turn to understand the balance or creative tension in writing instruction that exists between writing which is shaped in forms acceptable and familiar to the intended audience, and writing which is shaped by the desire to innovate and change, we also recognize those dual purposes which exist in the service-learning components we have integrated in our courses.

### *Landscapes of Service*

In one sequence of assignments, for example, we ask students to engage as a topic of inquiry the concept of service and what it means to serve. Writing informally in response to that prompt gives them a chance to articulate the generally unexamined assumptions which they bring to the college learning environment. It requires them to commit themselves to the value-rich meanings they carry with them—if only for the moment. Writing their ideas about service and serving, and voicing them out loud to one another, begins the process of profound unsettling of students' prior

knowledge. They hear and see what they think in a new context—a college classroom—but in addition they learn that their peers carry different assumptions and meanings, which immediately complicates the issue, thus opening it as a subject for inquiry. In one class, the conversation that ensued from this first part of the sequence set the terms of the conversation for the rest of the semester. While some immediately thought of military service, others talked about service in commercial terms, as in customer service, and still others were thinking in terms of domestic relationships, as in servants and "serving dinner." Some emphasized the status (or lack thereof) they associated with these meanings, whereas others saw in it a duty, or a necessary good, as in "you should get good service." A few sat wide-eyed listening to this rich set of associations before finally informing the class that when asked, they had immediately assumed only that community service meant what is handed down as a judicial sentence. It was the others' turn to stare in silence for a moment, having never even considered that realm of meaning.

With the problematizing begun, discussion moves on to investigate and consider these differences. In an assignment which asks for personal narrative and description and one familiar to many writing classrooms, we ask students to tell us about their experience doing volunteer work or community service. However, these students' narratives had already begun to demonstrate a self-consciousness about the nature of their prior experience, and raised questions, even if haltingly, about how they would categorize the work they had done, and how to understand it within an emerging discourse about obligation, freedom, hierarchy, and community.

Our subsequent investigations, in a sequence of writing and reading assignments, continue to spiral outwards from individual learner to larger social contexts. Asking the same set of questions with which we began, students interview peers and family members, widening the discourse community. They consult several dictionaries (one agent of cultural authority) to compare the meanings, uses, and etymologies of "service," "serve," "volunteer," "servant," and "community."

We read Robert Coles's introduction to *The Call of Service* (1993), in which he describes the models, provided by parents and other significant adults from his youth, of serving the community, and by which he demonstrates the variety and

complexity of motives, values, and degrees of self-awareness that informed them. We also read essays about the concept of public life and community in democratic America, such as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "On Being a Good Neighbor," and excerpts from Robert Bellah et al.'s *Habits of the Heart*, Daniel Kemmis' *Community and the Politics of Place*, and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, among others. In the following assignments, students then begin to explore the relationship of the individual to the community, and the individual's obligation to the community or the public good:

We have considered a number of writers as they think about the value of community, or a shared common life. We've tried to figure out Tocqueville's, Arendt's, Bellah's, and Kemmis' various positions on the value of public life and community by asking what each has to say about its purpose.

In this paper, we would like you to reflect on and analyze your own "practices" (to use Kemmis' term) and your own share in the public sphere of a common, communal, community life. Be specific and detailed, and use the language of your fellow thinkers to describe and analyze your experience.

How do the language and the perspectives of each writer help you to understand and think about your experiences? How do you end up viewing your experiences in light of what you understand these writers to be saying? Are there ways in which one writer's language or ideas present a challenge to another's?

Students, in other words, use the perspectives provided by these readings as a lens to re-visit both their prior experience in volunteering and community service as well as their current participation with a community agency.

#### *Raising Consciousness from Common Grounds*

In one of our community placements, students visited a residential health care center for senior citizens, and interviewed residents about their quality of life, concerns, and needs. One student came to that experience with a range of questions—about being around the elderly and the reasons "they" were there, about how they would respond to her interview questions (whether they'd be offended, for instance), but also about how she would write the article she had been asked to produce for the center's newsletter. Who was

going to read this? How frank could she be? Wouldn't they wonder why she, a mere first year college student, was writing it?

Our prior conversations about community translated for this student first into questions about how to see these "residents" as part of the community in which she lives, despite the fact that she currently lives in a dorm on a campus which seems miles removed from the surrounding city. She was also pushed, by our discussions of Daniel Kemmis' excerpt about barn raising in the rural Idaho of his childhood, to look for common ground: she began to see, for instance, that these senior citizens were, like her, consigned to a living arrangement that is essentially a ghetto of similarly-aged peers who have come from vastly different life situations, in a location separated from the surrounding community, and restricted in terms of choices they had enjoyed in their "previous" lives, such as access to a car and decisions about meals. She then brought with her to our class discussions a more complicated sense of community and diversity.

A student in another group had used metaphors of commerce in the third week of the semester to describe his work with an agency that provides medical care services to low income people. He announced to the class that he thought the agency ought to be more thankful and helpful to him and his group: they were providing the agency with free services and if the staff didn't demonstrate a recognition of that, students would not be willing to help. Obligation and the responsibility for polite (civil) discourse rested, in his mind, with the party who got something for nothing. At the end of the above sequence of writings, this student wrote:

The meaning of service has changed somewhat for me. I feel that service is any act that benefits your community, [but] also implies a sense of commitment and obligation to the task or people that you are serving... That feeling of responsibility [for] a position which society values but is not willing to pay for.

When two thirds of the semester had passed, he was immersed not only in trying to figure out how to learn the software program that would allow him to produce an informational brochure for this agency, but also in wrestling with (as another in that group put it) "how to say all that we need to say in this small space." "Every word matters!" exclaimed yet another. Students were struggling with linguistic choices and rhetorical constraints,

and also with understanding how to shape those choices for particular audiences. Conversations about the intended audience for this brochure took our discussions back to the issues raised earlier about service. When asked who the audience for the brochure was, this group had answered "The entire community is a potential audience." In response to a question about what values they shared with the audience, they wrote, "These services are potentially of use to all of us. Any of us may be in a position where we feel we cannot talk to our parents about physical and emotional problems." And when asked how their own values differed from those of the audience, they wrote, "We are better able to afford treatment because of our parents." However, when asked whether the audience would be interested in the subject and how the writers might reach out to the audience more effectively or explain the subject more convincingly, they answered, "Because of the nature of the document, we do not need to learn more in order to reach them. The brochure is of value to them, costs nothing, and all they have to do is pick it up." In class discussion, we pointed out that information about AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases are readily available for college students, yet the majority of their peers don't use or believe they need that information, which led the students to consider why people ignore or dispute "factual" or "free" information, and how social conditions affect the distribution of services, and appropriate or effective rhetorical strategies. Needless to say, it soon became clear to this group of students that "the entire community" was not their audience.

By the time this group neared completion of their writing project, their sense of obligation, community, and service had shifted dramatically. Because our discussions about audience had focused their attention on the agency's clients, they also came to focus on the clients (rather than the agency, as they had earlier) as the "recipients" of their service. And service was no longer something these students conceptualized as a direct commodity exchange which they were providing for free, but as something more complex and diffuse, a larger tapestry of which they are already a part, if only, as one student said, because "my tax dollars are being spent on the problems generated by the lack of adequate health care for the poor, so I am in a small way working to change that." Their sense of the public realm and their commitments to it had grown.

### **Reciprocity and Obligation, Community and Academy: Some Working Conclusions**

Our modest experience with a service-learning pedagogy yoked to the democratic/rhetorical model of writing instruction leads us to some working conclusions:

- Through rigorous, real-time exercises such as the memo on civil rights, students actively join democratic processes while practicing the arts of public discourse that communities use to debate controversial issues. Student writers are initiated into dialogue and deliberation strategies for articulating and resolving differences and determining justice. Rather than receding into the background, civic values and democratic aspirations become central to our students' explorations of diversity, commitments to equity, and respect for the difficulties of resolving conflicts within a community or a nation.
- Whether through writing assignments crafted according to the democratic/rhetorical model or through actual writing projects growing out of public service agency placements, students need extensive opportunities, not just to study different cultures and community aspirations through an expanded multicultural curriculum, but to engage and practice constructive conversations about American pluralism, including contested and uncongenial forms of individual or group dissent, and thereby forge new and lasting affirmations of civic reciprocity and ethical obligation.
- While conventional (and still too rare) community service opportunities and internship programs stress the delivery of much-needed care or the bridging of theory and practice within separate disciplines, the justice-seeking assignments and placements sought out by the Service-Learning Writing Project focus more on bringing democracy to bear on groups for whom democracy has not worked well. We seek to immerse our students in the pursuits—sometimes successful, often frustrating, seldom triumphal—of equal opportunity and social justice sought by sectors of American civic culture traditionally underenfranchised.
- We adopt as a guiding principle the importance of students' using language arts and

critically thinking about the history and assumptions of those values and practices. Our curriculum is intended as an introduction—simultaneously intellectual and experiential—into the ways democracy works or fails to work for the sake of preparing our students to be more effective participants in the realization of democratic values.

As Benjamin Barber (1994) has observed, "The leading dilemma of our time is whether the need to honor and acknowledge diversity can be reconciled with the need to create a common civic fabric with which Americans can identify. This challenge must be met first of all in the academy and then in the nation at large." Some of us would claim, as a result of our experience with and based on our commitment to MSU's Service-Learning Writing Project curriculum, that only if Barber's challenge is met in the university will it then be taken on by the nation at large.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Excerpts are all found in Barber and Battistoni (1993).

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## Appendix

### Selected Annotated Bibliography

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#### Civic Education and Civic Literacy

Barber, B. (1992). *An aristocracy of everyone: The politics of education and the future of America*. New York: Ballantine.

The title of this book reflects Barber's assertion that through effective civic education, all members of society can learn to take part in the democratic process of decision making and thus join the "aristocracy" or ruling class. The first three chapters discuss the potential for a multiple view of our historical canons, arguing for a balance between a unified history with the potential to exclude and a denial of any communal history. The next two chapters address the excesses of both postmodernism and conservatism. In the last two chapters, Barber argues for a civic mission for the university and demonstrates how community service can be a means of teaching liberatory participation in a democracy.

F. a, S. D., (Ed.) (1988). *Civic education: Its limits and conditions: Nine essays*. Ann Arbor, MI: Prakken Publishers.

The essays in this text, divided into three sections, reflect the debate over the role of civic education. The first section deals with defining the philosophy of democracy and citizenship, including discussions of civic literacy, social forces countering democratic education, and conflicting definitions of civic education. Section two covers the difficulties of institutionalizing civic education in a pluralist society, discussing meritocracy, gender bias, and the potential of African-American social theories as models. The third section looks to the current social climate and the possibilities of global citizenship as they affect civic education.

Giles, D. E. and Eyler, J. (1994). The theoretical roots of service-learning in John Dewey: Toward a theory of service-learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 1(1), 77-85.

The authors note the absence of solid and agreed-upon theoretical underpinnings for service-learning and argue for the development of

such a shared understanding. They review Dewey's theories of experiential learning and of citizenship education in a democracy, which they feel are central to the theoretical enterprise of service-learning. A series of questions to guide further development of service-learning as a field of study are also included.

Morse, S. W. (1993). The practice of citizenship: Learn by doing. *The Social Studies*, 84, 164.

The author focuses on the need for active participation as the foundation for citizenship education, based on a model of participatory democracy. She suggests a combination of discussion of civic issues within the classroom and service in the community. The classroom is a public space, and as such can be developed into a civic community. Service experiences should be contextualized by relevant reading, clearly defined in terms of responsibility, and structured to allow reflection on action.

Schultz, S. K. (1991). Whither civic education: Classics or community service? *Education Digest*, 56, 56-60.

Schultz briefly summarizes the educational and social problems that civic education hopes to address. Two approaches to civic education are then described, the first being the study of classical, historical texts and the second the experiential approach. He then elaborates on problems with each approach if it is followed exclusively, arguing that what is needed is a blend of these two very different traditions. He concludes that the university must work to establish community between disciplines, between educators holding one or the other of the views he describes, and between educators and the larger community.

Seigel, S. and Rockwood, V. (1993). Democratic education, student empowerment, and community service: Theory and practice. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 26, 65-70.

The authors define democratic education and argue for a broader definition of democracy, going beyond voting to active participation. They

stress the need for democratic experiences within classrooms to develop social responsibility, and the need for critical thinking skills and contextual information to help students make sense of service experiences. The need for experiential education is also emphasized; a brief review of the major theorists in this area is included. They argue that service-learning must be integrated into the curriculum, not merely tacked on.

### Service-Learning, Values Education and the Language Arts

Bacon, N. (1990, Sept.-Oct.). Student Writers in the Real World. *Experiential Education*, p. 8+.

A short article describing one university instructor's experience with incorporating service-learning in a composition course. Bacon notes the artificiality of student writing when the teacher is the only audience, and contrasts this to the "real" writing students did for public service agencies. She provides descriptions of students' work and of their positive responses and improved writing abilities.

Crawford, K. (1993). Community service writing in an advanced composition class. In J. Howard, (Ed.) *Praxis I: A faculty casebook on community service learning* (pp. 75-84). Ann Arbor, MI: OCSL Press.

Crawford begins by describing a writing course she taught at the University of Michigan called Practical English and explaining how and why she modified one section of the course to incorporate a service-learning model. Her goal was to determine whether the service-learning component led to greater engagement with the class; both machine-read and written course evaluations showed positive results. Crawford goes on to list specific difficulties encountered in the service section and to supply pedagogical guidelines for avoiding them. She concludes with a discussion of the benefits that have convinced her to incorporate service-learning in all of her sections of Practical English.

Delve, C., Mintz, S., and Stewart, G. (1990). Community service as values education. *New directions for student services*, no. 50. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

This collection of essays aims to provide faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals with resources for initiating or continuing service-learning efforts in higher education. The editors present their own model, which serves as

a foundation for subsequent articles and stresses developmental potential for clients and students alike. Diverse learning styles and ways to accommodate them are described. Another article argues for the integration of teaching, research, and reflection into the service experience. Three chapters discuss integration of service-learning into campus activities, residence halls, and ministries. The final three chapters address the relationships between the university, the community, and service agencies and argue for the use of guiding principles in navigating these relationships.

Herzberg, B. (1994). Community service and critical teaching. *College Composition and Communication*, 45, 307-319.

The author is a professor at Bentley College, a school of business, where he teaches a freshman composition course on literacy and schooling with a service-learning component. He begins here by reviewing the benefits of service in an academic setting, but he questions whether students can develop a critical consciousness, an awareness of the social forces in their own lives and the lives of their clients, through service and personal response writing alone. The American myths of meritocracy and individualism are held dear by his students and a primary goal of the course he describes is to help students perceive systemic forces in order to become socially responsible and potentially transformative citizens.

Stotsky, S., (Ed.) (1991). *Connecting Civic Education and Language Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

While not focusing directly on service-learning, this collection of essays by language educators and theorists provides an essential link between civic education and teaching of reading, writing, and speech. Stotsky notes the decline of a civic ethic in this country and explains why schools must address this deficit in our national character. The rest of the essays are divided into two sections. The first deals with reading in terms of accessibility of public documents, literary study, and research processes. The second focuses on writing and its role in developing moral civic discourse based on dialogue rather than polarizing arguments.

Swanson, E. (1994). Incorporating service learning into writing and literature classes. In R.J. Kraft and M. Swadener (Eds.), *Building community: Service*



*learning in the academic disciplines* (pp. 129-137). Denver: Colorado Campus Compact.

In this chapter, Swanson begins by pointing out the need for university faculty to become more aware of the practice and potential of service-learning. She differentiates service-learning from volunteerism by emphasizing its integration into the content of academic courses. A brief discussion of the role of faculty includes the fit between service-learning and critical teaching through praxis, the role of experience, and a social view of literacy. Swanson goes on to provide descriptions of her writing and literature courses that incorporate service-learning, including a course outline for a freshman composition course in which students acted as literacy tutors.

Watters, A. and Ford, M. (1995). *Writing for change: A community reader*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

——— *A guide for change: Resources for implementing community service writing*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

The first volume is a reader designed for use in college-level composition courses. Its readings and assignments, grouped around six themes, aim to encourage thought, writing, and participation in communities within and beyond the university. The second text is a resource guide for faculty and students, touching on the theories and objectives behind service-learning and focusing on the practical matters of incorporating service in a composition course. There are question and answer sections, worksheets, case studies, and multiple writings by students, faculty, and agency representatives.