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## The Literacy Paradox: Service-Learning and the Traditional English Department

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*The Dayton Literacy Project uses a service-learning course, offered by the University of Dayton, to bring together undergraduates and GED students from the local community. This paper discusses this course's intellectual rationale, its organization, and its work with women receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children. The overall success of the project suggests some of the ways that the discipline of English can be re-envisioned to integrate academic study in the humanities with literacy instruction.*

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In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose (1989) describes the separation, encouraged in virtually all English departments, between "remedial" instruction and the more "serious" business of teaching literature and theory. Rose convincingly argues that this separation depends upon an atomistic "view of error" that most often prevents students in "basic" English courses from becoming fully literate. Basic writing students learn, more than anyone, that "the most important thing about writing—the very essence of writing—is grammatical correctness, not the communication of something meaningful, or the generative struggle with ideas" (pp. 210-211). Moreover, by isolating the act of writing from its social context, the atomistic model encourages methods of teaching—easily identified, for the most part, by a preoccupation with "correction" to the exclusion of ideas—that are "simply not supported by more recent research on language and cognition" (pp. 208-210).

Though Rose's primary concern is with the struggle towards literacy of "America's educational underclass"—those students who are, in one way or another, marked as "remedial" from an early age—his analysis suggests that the conventional divisions within English departments have implications that go far beyond the basic writing classroom. For instance, Rose mentions that the atomistic model inevitably results in the philosophical and administrative separation of developmental English from "the rich theoretical investigation that characterizes other humanistic

study" (p.211). By now, in most English departments, it is taken as a given that basic writing is the exclusive concern of part-time faculty, "writing centers," and, at best, a few composition "specialists"; it certainly has no visible connection to the work of the more "literary" faculty, other than providing some of the tuition revenue that might, if all goes well, allow for smaller classes and some time for research. Thus, the very courses designed to provide "underprepared" or "disadvantaged" students with an entry into higher education typically provide a barrier to those elements of the discipline—"great" literature, theory, "canon wars," cultural studies, interdisciplinary integration—that ordinarily generate the most excitement and, in reality, might very well do them the most good. At the same time, by defining literacy, at least implicitly, in isolation from any immediate social context, the atomistic model inevitably perpetuates divisions between the University and the community at large.

Recently, the Dayton Literacy Project, developed by a group of University of Dayton faculty and students working in collaboration with service professionals and adult literacy students in the Dayton area, has examined the wider implications of the literacy paradox: the many ways in which a refusal to address basic literacy issues impoverishes the teaching of English in both composition and literature and at every academic level. In the process, we have developed a model for resolving this paradox, even within the confines of a traditional English department: a ser-

vice-learning literacy course, strategically organized to reconnect "basic" composition to what Rose calls the "generative struggle with ideas," as this struggle can be found in literature, theory, and other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

### The Dayton Literacy Project: The Foundations

The Dayton Literacy Project began in the fall of 1992 when the authors applied for an Urban Fellowship, funding provided by the University of Dayton to encourage faculty to develop research and service programs that increase or improve "connections" between the university and the surrounding community. None of the two-dozen or so projects previously funded by this fellowship had involved the humanities—let alone the English Department—in any noticeable way. Typical projects ranged from the analysis of computer systems used by businesses in Dayton to a study of the city's geological foundations. We proposed to design a course, to be offered in the fall of 1993, that would provide students with an opportunity to study literacy in the classroom and, at the same time, serve as literacy mentors for women who were receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children in the Dayton area. As we planned and wrote our proposal, "welfare mothers" were appearing almost daily in the national and local news—usually described by politicians as the cause of every national ill from a stagnant economy to declining schools. What better way, we thought, to introduce students to the social context of reading and writing, than to work with the latest social scapegoat? When we asked a local Human Services Administrator if she could provide us with a group of women who met the profile we had in mind—welfare mothers, reading at a fifth to eighth grade level, working toward a General Equivalency Degree (GED), and willing to learn—her response convinced us that we were on the right track. "Honey," she said, "I have twelve thousand of them."

One of the unusual features of the Dayton Literacy Project—and, we would eventually come to believe, one of the most fortunate—was that the project's two founders, the authors of this article, came from very different backgrounds within the discipline of English. For that matter, neither was trained, primarily, as an "expert" or "specialist" in literacy. One of us (Conniff) had studied and taught mainly in modern poetry and

literary theory, whereas the other (Youngkin) had done most of her work in rhetoric and composition, especially the history of rhetoric. Yet we shared from the start a concern for literacy issues of a particular kind since, before coming to the University of Dayton, we had both taught extensively in university programs in Ohio prisons. Teaching introductory courses in prison, even at the college level, we had become acquainted with some of the devastating effects of illiteracy. According to one moderate estimate, reported by Jonathan Kozol (1985) in *Illiterate America*, roughly 60 percent of prison inmates "cannot read above the grade school level." Even back in 1983—a very early point in the ongoing "boom" in the prison business, the estimated cost of maintaining functionally illiterate inmates, in both state and federal prisons, was \$6.6 billion per year (Kozol, pp. 13-14). Yet we had also seen, in the prison, just how powerful literature can be—including, certainly, what is usually taken to be "great" or "canonical" literature—in the struggle of many other prisoners to combat the debilitating effects of incarceration. For instance, teaching in medium security prisons, Conniff developed a course in "Prison Literature," beginning with the fall of the Bastille and the Marquis de Sade's *Justine* and concluding with the return of the death penalty in the United States and Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, based primarily on books inmates in medium security prisons requested for courses and book clubs, passed around their dorms, or otherwise insisted on reading.

All in all, we probably were disadvantaged, to some degree, by our general ignorance of the disciplinary, academic research on literacy and related issues. But with this ignorance came a rather natural disinclination to feel isolated from the "mainstream" of academic life in our university—a mainstream that still seems, tragically, to have no desire to create a permanent place for literacy, as either a subject or a practice. And because of our previous experiences in prison education, we were especially predisposed, perhaps most of all in the teaching of "basic" courses, to consider what Rose calls "the social context error"—and to articulate this social context to what would ordinarily be considered the highest levels of literary study.

Of course, when we began the Dayton Literacy Project, we were very much aware that we were now in a world far removed, in most respects, from the prison. The University of Dayton is a

Catholic comprehensive university of 6300 undergraduates with a law school, a school of education, and an assortment of graduate programs, including a Masters program in English. More than sixty percent of our students are graduates of Catholic high schools and an even greater majority of them are from upper-middle class, intact two-parent families. Not surprisingly, only one of the undergraduates who chose to take part in our literacy program had any previous experience with adult basic education, and very few of them, if any, had any direct experience or even specific knowledge of the problems of urban high schools in a city like Dayton. So even at the beginning, when we received our Urban Fellowship, we knew all too well that Dayton's literacy problems were both a few blocks and a few light years away.

Our strategy for addressing local literacy issues through a service-learning course had three parts. First, a discussion of readings from a number of academic disciplines and selected works of literature, in a conventional classroom setting, would help us to develop a critical understanding of the literacy issues raised by our service. Second, literacy instruction with the "welfare mothers" would provide the service component of our overall project, help us to establish some critical distance from our own literacy, and provide a social context in which we could articulate our academic study to our literacy work. Third, academic research, in which students and faculty would collaborate to write articles for publication in professional journals concerned with literacy, would help us to clarify further our perspectives on the issues, continue our examination of the relationships between academic scholarship and literacy practice, contribute to the development of the field, and evaluate the success of our service. A student could enroll in the course for one to three academic credits, depending upon how many of these components she wanted to complete. Each of the two semesters in which we offered the course, all of the students chose to participate in the "direct" literacy work. Roughly a third, each time, chose to participate in all three components.

Our conventional classroom sessions took place once each week for an hour and fifteen minutes. The foundation of this academic part of the course was provided by four books: *Lives on the Boundary* by Mike Rose, *Illiterate America* by Jonathan Kozol, *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and

Jill Tarule, and *Orality and Literacy* by Walter Ong. We chose *Lives on the Boundary* as our initial reading mainly because it raises a great number of fundamental literacy issues—including the often disastrous effects of labeling some writers "remedial" from the early grades, the politics of testing and remediation, the prevailing tendency to teach adult students like children, and the alienation of university English departments from any community in which literacy is not taken for granted—in the form of a personal narrative that immediately engages undergraduates. For many of the University of Dayton students involved in our project, Rose's book provided their initial entry into a world of diminished academic and professional expectations; in fact, for many, the book provided a first glimpse of a "perspective on failure that lays open the logic of error." From the start, then, we were asking our students to develop, as Rose eloquently puts it, "a revised store of images of educational excellence" (p. 237).

With the other three primary texts, we attempted to locate this perspective of literacy, with its disconcerting "store of images," in an increasingly broad and interdisciplinary context. To this end, *Illiterate America* served as our initial source of "background" information to complement Rose's more personal narrative. We chose *Illiterate America*, of the many available works, mainly because of Kozol's conversance with an exceptional range of issues: his ability to move from the effects of illiteracy in the military, for instance, to the ingrained reluctance of universities to address illiteracy on an ambitious scale. We thought that it would be useful for our students to try to locate their literacy work within this kind of overview. Regardless of personal background or field of study, it seemed to us that all students should be able to articulate some of their most immediate interests to some of the issues Kozol raises. Conversely, we also thought that our literacy work would ultimately benefit from such an attempt to use the classroom as a kind of forum that draws from the widest possible range of fields and perspectives.

Our study of *Women's Ways of Knowing* was our most deliberate effort to step outside the disciplinary boundaries of our own professional training. Up to this point in the course, "literacy" was, essentially, a kind of natural phenomenon that seemed to touch, in much the same way, on just about every aspect of American life. Now, it was time to examine and revise our understand-

ing of literacy itself. Drawing on the feminist psychology of Carol Gilligan and their own extensive interviews with 135 women, Belenky and her colleagues develop a scheme of intellectual development that relies heavily on the metaphor of voice and silence: "One growth metaphor in particular reverberated throughout the women's stories of their intellectual development. Again and again women spoke of "gaining a voice" (1986, p. 16). The process of "gaining a voice," in their framework, is primarily a way of describing a continuum from, at one end, a relationship between self and knowledge in which "the source of self-knowledge" is perceived to be "lodged in others" to, at the other end, a relationship in which "All knowledge is constructed, and the knower is an intimate part of the known" (pp. 31, 137). The obvious appeal of this metaphor was its suggestion of a connection between the development of literacy, conceived well beyond the boundaries of "basic" language instruction, and an increasingly rich mental life.

In more than a dozen years of teaching composition in a wide variety of settings, each of us had seen a great deal of evidence that our students are most often true to their training: that is, they are usually predisposed, like most of their teachers, to see basic writing instruction as a matter of rules and correction. Still, most of the students who enrolled in our literacy course realized, from the start, that an uncritical commitment to the corrective model would be inappropriate in the kind of literacy classroom we were creating. After all, the undergraduates had little or no experience as instructors of any kind, and we were asking them to work with adult students whose range of experience—to use their own words—made them "feel like kids." We wanted the undergraduates to examine, and learn from, these suspicions. For this reason, most of all, we thought it was crucial, as they began to work with adult literacy students, that they have available the kind of framework provided by *Women's Ways of Knowing*. We wanted them to be prepared to shift their thinking about literacy away from a preoccupation with "mistakes" and toward issues of epistemology, reason, orality, and the social context of language.

By using *Orality and Literacy* as our fourth "basic text," we continued to reconceptualize literacy—this time introducing a broad historical scheme. Ong attempts to trace the emergence of literacy from a "primary oral culture"—that is, "a culture with no knowledge whatsoever of writing

or even of the possibility of writing" (1982, p.31). He then uses this relationship between orality and literacy to discuss "secondary orality," a distinctly contemporary orality, dependent upon literacy but created largely by the manipulation of texts through electronic media. Ong's monumental project draws upon his extraordinary faith in the power of literate culture—academically speaking, the power of scholarship—to reconstruct what he calls "some of the psychodynamics of orality".

Fortunately, literacy, though it consumes its own oral antecedents and, unless it is carefully monitored, even destroys their memory, is also infinitely adaptable. It can restore their memory, too. Literacy can be used to reconstruct for ourselves the pristine human consciousness which was not literate at all—at least to reconstruct this consciousness pretty well, though not perfectly (we can never forget enough of our familiar present to reconstitute in our minds any past in its full integrity). Such reconstruction can bring a better understanding of what literacy itself has meant in shaping man's consciousness toward and in high-technology cultures. (p.15)

Though this fundamental assumption is controversial, it became in several respects the key to our use of *Orality and Literacy* in the Dayton Literacy Project. As many of our undergraduates worked for the first time with Adult Basic Education students, we thought it was crucial to provide an intellectual backdrop in which "marginal literacy" or "illiteracy" is not somehow treated as a void. For Ong, illiteracy is inescapably bound to orality; therefore, it is shaped and empowered by a social world and a "psychodynamics" as potentially rich as those of literacy. In addition, once illiteracy is conceived largely as orality, it can be placed in a productive dialogue with the alternative psychodynamics of literacy. If we could just begin to understand orality in terms like Ong's, we figured, then our literacy work would be much less subject to the kinds of condescension and "cultural imperialism" that dominate the worst kinds of University-sponsored community service. We could have, instead, a dialogue of cultures; we could learn as much as we taught. In short, we were making an academic leap of faith—a faith that is not shared by the mainstream of the academy, and not even shared throughout the literacy community, but one that could establish a productive, mutually critical relationship be-

tween the discipline of English and the needs of the larger community.

In addition to studying these basic texts, each week we asked students to bring to class and discuss other works—short stories, poems, newspaper articles, course assignments of any kind—that they thought might “work,” for whatever reason, in our literacy instruction. In this way, each week’s more conventional classroom session became direct preparation for the next “literacy session.” As we discussed Tillie Olson’s “As I Stand Here Ironing,” Maya Angelou’s poem for the Clinton inauguration, Mark Twain’s “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaverous County,” Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*, and many more, we agreed on the “nuts and bolts” of each week’s session—that is, how such works might be introduced, read aloud, discussed, and written about. But, just as importantly, we became increasingly aware of the wealth of academically respectable literature that is eminently usable in a literacy project. More and more, we came to realize that we were doing a great deal more than “community service,” as it is usually defined; we were also working, intellectually, to develop our own increasingly elaborate connections between formal assignments and personal commitment, literacy and orality, our private reading and our public voices.

#### A Day in the Life of a Service-Learning Course in Literacy

On a typical day the ABE women arrived at the university, usually two or three at a time, on Dayton RTA bus number 16. After walking to the classroom, they would mix freely with the undergraduates (who were always sure to be there first, strategically seated to ensure mixing). From the second week on, a series of informal conversations would spread throughout the room, until a determined attempt was made to begin the week’s “program.” The first order of business was to get reacquainted. We would all sit in a large circle and one of the faculty participants would announce a topic: e.g., “Remember a time you were read to when you were a child”; “What does the word ‘play’ mean to you?” Then, going around the circle, each person would introduce himself or herself and respond to the topic. Using this approach, what became most clear, at the start of each session, was just how much the ABE students—those for whom we were ostensibly there to provide “literacy”—could contribute to our

entire project. Not only did they have more in the way of “life experiences” than most of our undergraduates, they also had well-developed skills for orally recreating and reflecting upon these experiences. In short, their speaking immediately seemed much better than their writing. At the same time, to borrow from Ong’s scheme, we were beginning to reconstruct for our students a kind of “primary orality” that, at least for most of them, had never played any significant role in their university education. In an important sense, this “class” was conceived as a community in which oral storytelling and reminiscence—two key elements in transitions between orality and literacy—were central. Of course, as a matter of “introduction,” this opening event soon became superfluous, but we continued it throughout the semester, for its symbolic value and for the sense of community that it helped us to establish and maintain.

Most often, this community building session was followed by reading aloud and a discussion of the day’s reading—a way of bridging the gap between distinct orality and literacy. Each time, we would read one of the works chosen and discussed with our undergraduates in that week’s more “academic” session. It was in this component, more than any other, that the undergraduates established their ownership of the course. Inevitably relying on their advice, we managed to arrive at selections of poetry and fiction that appealed to everyone involved in the project: sections of Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Wallace Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” (for Halloween, of course), passages of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.

We knew, from the start, that the manner in which we pursued the reading session of the class would always be crucial. Our goal was to manage this part so that the ABE students would not suffer any embarrassment—as, in certain settings, even many university undergraduates do—when reading aloud and when beginning to discuss literature. What we arrived at was a kind of “group reading” with voluntary participation. One of the faculty would begin reading the work of the day, then stop at some point, chosen more or less at random. Someone else would pick up there, and read until he or she felt like stopping, and so on until the work was finished. There was no correction, only entertainment. This method certainly was not complicated, but it did the trick: all of the



ABE students joined in, at one time or another, in most of the readings. They were also full participants in the discussions of the reading that followed, inevitably providing less academic perspectives—in most cases perspectives of a generation and a way of life much different from those of the undergraduates. At times, often with the undergraduates taking the initiative, we decided upon interesting variations on our usual process: for our last session, for instance, we invited the ABE students to bring their children, and in our reading session we sat on the floor in small groups and read children's stories.

Though the reintroduction, reading, and discussion were all important in themselves, we also viewed them as elements in an extensive exercise in prewriting. After all, our "welfare mothers" had come to us looking for entry into a more literate world—in the sense of conventional, academic literacy. They wanted to receive their GED's and, in many cases, move on to community colleges or jobs that required improved writing skills. We tried to recognize and authenticate these aspirations by locating our literacy work on the University of Dayton campus, by using accomplished literature in our readings and, at times, by drawing upon the cultural life of the university. But most importantly, we worked very hard at teaching them to write. Everyone in the program, professors included, wrote for thirty or forty minutes during each of our weekly sessions. We did this writing, as well as a number of weekly "homework assignments," in 11" by 14" artist's sketchbooks that served as our journals. In an effort to ease ingrained resistances to writing, we experimented with a wide range of subjects and literary genres: we hoped that, given a supportive classroom environment, the more different kinds of writing we encouraged our ABE students to try, and the greater the array of formal possibilities we presented to them, the more likely they would be to approach writing with a sense of free play. For the first two weeks, after making a collage of our lives, we wrote autobiographies. In response to Alice Walker's poem, "To My Sister Molly Who in the Fifties," we wrote poems about our own siblings. On Halloween, divided into two groups, we wrote a pair of collective horror stories, which turned out to be anthologies of absurd events and grotesque images.

After she completed her day's writing, each ABE student would work on revisions with one or two undergraduates—chosen at random on the first day—who served as her literacy mentors. It

was at this point that we worked directly on matters of grammar and spelling, always being careful to ensure that this revision worked both ways. In this context, the ABE students typically invited criticism on standard usage and were just as willing to offer advice of their own. As three of our undergraduates put it, "The ABE students often ask the university students for help with their writing and soon, misspelled words, incorrect verb agreement, and any other errors are not only corrected, they are fully explained. In reverse, the university students often ask the ABE students to review their work and to offer criticism from an ABE perspective" (Griffin, Sarcyck, Swarts & Youngkin 1993, p. 20).

Near the end of our first semester, we were able to arrange for the fiction writer Toni Cade Bambara, the visiting writer for the University Scholars program, to visit one of our literacy sessions. The week before her visit, we had read and discussed her short story "My Man Bovanne." Our writing assignment that week had been for each student to compose a list of questions that she would like to ask the author. The ABE students, in particular, were pleased to have an opportunity to meet a "real writer," especially at a time when many of them were just beginning to think of themselves as writers. Bambara "told us that we, too, all of us, are writers; in our spare moments, at least, we all compose stories of people we see riding the bus, doing laundry, walking down the street" (Conniff, Bortle & Joseph, 1994, p. 130). For our writing assignment the week after Bambara's visit, each of us wrote a letter to Bambara thanking her for coming. The last words of one of the ABE students' letter stated what had become the central theme of our writing instruction: "We didn't know we were writers until you told us (smile)" (p. 130).

### Some Measures of Success

The Dayton Literacy Project was successful on just about every level. In fact, what seems most surprising, in retrospect, is just how little difficulty we had in reconciling the various goals and ambitions of everyone involved: undergraduates, faculty, Adult Basic Education students, social services administrators, and graduate students. Now, after completing two semesters of the Dayton Literacy Project and beginning preparations for a continuing course, we have not been left with the kind of problem we anticipated—that is, a need to fine tune our methods and goals. Of

course, certain kinds of adjustments are still necessary, and always will be, but the main issue now before us, as it has turned out, is at once more fundamental and more difficult: we are faced with the task of beginning to redefine the discipline of English to account for both the extraordinary potential and the radical implications of service-based literacy education.

Measuring the success of the original group of "welfare mothers" was problematic. To begin with, they did not come to us—collectively, at least—with very clearly defined educational goals. They were united in our program simply by their willingness to volunteer to "try something new," to "take on a challenge," to explore an alternative to one of the five days each week that they had been scheduled to receive conventional ABE instruction at one of the local adult education centers. Yet, as individuals, these women did have aspirations, some of which were clear and even urgent: to acquire the language skills necessary for a particular job, to continue their formal education in a Community College, to read for pleasure, to help their children with their homework. For our part, we were more concerned with issues of motivation and confidence than with the immediate obtainment of any standardized "reading level" or educational goal.

For these reasons, and because of our own academic interests entering the project, we decided to use the research component of our first semester's course to develop and implement appropriate methods of evaluation. In this way, we thought we could adjust our evaluation methods to the particular circumstances of our program and—perhaps even more importantly, in the long run—construct a working model by which academic research involving undergraduates and "direct" literacy work could inform and energize each other. Each of the faculty members involved in the project worked with a "research team" of undergraduates to decide on a specific topic and approach, conduct the necessary research, then write an essay to be submitted for publication.

Since our overall approach depended largely on the relationship between literacy as it is conventionally considered—that is, basic reading and writing skills, more or less—and intellectual development, one of the research teams decided to study the progress of the ABE women in these terms. After composing two sets of questions similar to those used by Belenky and her colleagues in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, this group interviewed the ABE students at the begin-

ning and at the end of the semester. The main conclusion of this study was that, by the end of the semester, these women had gained a "new voice," primarily because they had become more comfortable with the process of writing:

One woman said, "I can now write off the top of my head." This project seemed to make the women more tolerant of their own mistakes. Rita said that in the past she would just give up and not write because she could not spell the word and felt stupid, so she did not want to go on. (Griffin et al, p.21)

Despite having been brought to a university campus and mixed with undergraduates—or, more precisely, because of this experience—the ABE students felt more intellectually capable: "They were not intimidated to speak as they had been in many of their school experiences." In fact, the authors concluded, for the first time these women could remember, "they felt a part of the education system" (p. 21).

Our second research team chose to examine our efforts at the reading and teaching of "great poetry" in the literacy project. Because such poetry is usually treated as a particularly elevated genre, this study tested not only some of the fundamental assumptions of "remedial" courses but also some of the possibilities for incorporating literacy education into even the most traditional of English departments. For a methodology, these researchers chose to conduct a case study of one of the welfare mothers, making use of her interviews, autobiography, journals, and assorted drafts of her poetry. The student studied, Eleanor, quickly demonstrated a proficiency in writing poetry that she had never demonstrated in her prose. In exercises that involved writing variations on great poems, Eleanor even added a number of poetic techniques—rhyme, stanza, repetition, parallel construction, exclamation—that did not appear in the models we provided and were not mentioned in our discussions. She, too, seemed to have escaped from long-ingrained constraints on her writing:

Poetry can provide a rare opportunity for a student like Eleanor to act like a writer. When she wrote a poem of her own, she put in rhymes and stanzas, not because they were in the model we provided, and not because she was instructed to do so, but because that is how she imagined a poet is supposed to work. And so she assumed a control over her language that could no longer be considered remedial. At



least for a while, she allowed herself to be a poet. (Conniff et al, p. 130)

Though our two teams conducted their research independently, they arrived at conclusions that were similar in at least one important respect: with "basic writers" like our ABE students, the atomistic model ultimately does much more harm than good. What adult literacy students find most beneficial is full membership in a challenging educational community. "The rich theoretical investigation that characterizes other humanistic study," as Rose calls it, should be at the heart of "basic" education.

From the perspective of the university, there are many other ways in which the Dayton Literacy Project suggests that a service-learning literacy course can be of benefit to an English department. Our work with the welfare mothers led to a second grant, from Ohio Campus Compact, which we used to conduct another experimental literacy program, this time working with a wider range of students who had recently failed the GED and could be considered "at risk" of abandoning their efforts at education. In addition, three graduate students who took part in the initial planning stages of the project maintained their interests in literacy and moved on, after receiving their Masters degrees, to leadership positions with local literacy organizations; a fourth graduate student, who led one of our literacy sessions and sat in on a number of others, went on to doctoral work in adult education at Teacher's College of Columbia University. To date, at least two of the undergraduates who have graduated since taking part in the course are working in the literacy field. Also, with the help of the human services administrators who helped us in the planning stages, we were able to establish continuing internships in the Human Services Department for students interested in working with welfare recipients. In times when external funding is rare and job opportunities for graduating English majors are scarce, literacy work can provide a department like ours—both the faculty and the students—with an entirely new range of opportunities.

### Re-envisioning the English Department

Still, few English departments seem prepared to seize upon opportunities of these kinds. As Kozol writes in *Illiterate America*, academic humanists "are potentially the most effective allies

for illiterate people" (p. 165). But a variety of pressures within the academy—mostly related to the artificial disciplinary boundaries that relegate the problem of adult illiteracy to, at best, a subspecialty of education—have historically prevented any large-scale alliance.

Nonetheless, a number of continuing developments in the humanities, which have been altering English more than any other discipline, suggest that initiatives for service-based literacy education may become, before long, more manageable than ever before. Most obviously, the "rise of theory," that broad movement which began back in the late 1960's, has resulted in a remarkable drift toward interdisciplinary research and, to borrow a phrase from Gerald Graff, "new languages of generalization" (1992, p. 353). Most of all, this movement has drawn from other academic disciplines to bring the study of literature closer to "the concerns of students and lay people" (p. 353). Gender studies, ethnic studies, ethnocriticism, postcolonialism, cultural studies, new historicism—all of these "new approaches," among others, have resulted at least occasionally in scholarship that links literature to fundamental questions of literacy or orality. For instance, given the perspective we have acquired from our work with literacy programs, it seems just about inevitable that the rise of theory would correspond, as it has, with increased attention to writers—Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, Maxine Hong Kingston, to note just a few of the most obvious examples—whose work draws directly from oral traditions.

More recently, institutional histories (Graff, 1987; Marsden, 1994; Turner, 1992) have demonstrated that an alliance between the study of literature and literacy work should not be considered, in any long-range historical sense, at all foreign to the professed missions of English departments. These studies have reminded us that, in its beginnings as a discipline in the post-Civil War period, the study of literature was part of an older religious conception of higher education. Later, as the discipline gained official recognition, it quickly aligned itself with moral philosophy in the general drift of universities toward secular models. Only with the rise of hegemonic New Criticism, in the late 1940's and 1950's, did moral justifications of teaching literature become implicit and, eventually, disreputable.

As the profession of English continues to recover its own history, even traditionalists will come to realize, before long, that the study of

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literacy—which is most logically addressed through service-based learning—has firm roots in many of the richest literary traditions. To return to the passage from *Lives on the Boundary* with which we began, the atomistic model that would separate literacy work from the rest of the English curriculum only “fosters attitudes and beliefs about written language that, more than anything, keep students”—the most “advanced” as well as the most “disadvantaged”—“from becoming fully, richly literate” (p. 211).

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