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Stories We Tell: From Baltimore to Denver

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In 2012, we both decided to participate in *Collegium: A Colloquy on Faith and Intellectual Life* at St. John's University, and it was there that we discovered our shared interest in service learning, social justice, and metacognitive reflection. We realized that we were both using our respective cities, Baltimore and Denver, as canvases to find, tell, document, and archive compelling stories. We designed our courses to be a lens through which our students can "see" both the city and themselves in a different and perhaps more interesting way. Dr. Kaye Whitehead's course, "Baltimore Stories," is an upper-level service-learning production course that is offered in the spring semester. In addition to the normal course offerings, the students volunteer for two hours per week at a women's shelter in downtown Baltimore. Dr. Jason Taylor's two-semester sequence includes "Writing for Social Justice" and "Philosophical Explorations" as parts of the first-year experience. In addition, students enroll both semesters in a one-credit course which houses a three-to-four hour weekly commitment at a service-learning placement and a weekly discussion section devoted to reflection on their placement experience.

Baltimore Stories

The main goal in all of my classes is to teach and train my students how to use their pen, camera, or voice to focus the world's attention on social justice issues. In the course where my students spend time working with and learning from women who are experiencing homelessness, I am also interested in helping the students develop a community where the open exchange of knowledge and resources can easily and naturally occur. I am committed to teaching students how to use the tools of our trade to bring clarity out of confusion by addressing issues of social justice in their work.

At the beginning of the semester, the students are often uncomfortable, confused, and in some cases overwhelmed after talking to the women and volunteering in the kitchen at My Sister's Place, a women's shelter. Although they come into class knowing that inequities and social injustice exist, they do not have a visceral understanding of what this actually means and how this knowledge would then frame their experience. After working in the kitchen for two weeks, the students are partnered with a woman from the shelter, and their assignment is to record the woman's story and

produce a multimedia story based on it.

Since they are spending time at the shelter, in class, and with the woman, I use three different metacognitive strategies to help them synthesize their experiences: bi-weekly partner reflections, which are written and shared with both their community partner and with me; monthly peer lectures, where students present their research and reflections to their classmates; and a digital stories notebook, which every student must keep and which provides them with a space to think through and reflect on new material, their digital story, and their volunteer experience. The students are encouraged to be very creative with their digital story and to include their partner in the final decision-making process.

Stories We Tell

From Baltimore to Denver

**By Karsonya Wise
Whitehead and
Jason Taylor**

My hope is that by combining service learning with a traditional classroom environment, my students will learn how to be advocates for social justice. I do everything that I can to teach my students to be extremists for justice, extremists for social change, extremists armed with both compassion and competence who are committed to using their unique oneness to move mountains, initiate change, and ultimately be the change that they want to see in the world. This, then, is the essence of my course: to teach my students how to recognize, challenge, and change injustices.

Baltimore Stories can be viewed at <http://bmorestories.net/projects/my-sisters-place/>

Denver Stories

In my sequence of courses, I seek to combine an introduction to the traditional ideal of *eloquentia perfecta*—the good person writing and speaking well—with direct engagement in the community outside of class. In past teaching, I have found that the integration of head, heart, and hands possible in service learning is a powerful way to connect students to communities beyond the walls of the academy. I have also found that such connections meaningfully impact the work we do together within the academy. As a way of strengthening those connections, in the current courses I have been exploring the potential in adding "voice" to that integration of head, heart, and hands.

In the spring semester, students offer two versions of a "critical incident presentation," first as a traditional speech and then in digital storytelling format. In this presentation, students give a detailed account of and reflection on one episode or a series of connected episodes at their placements which have significantly challenged or changed their perspective. Although the stories in these presentations are told from the students' perspectives and necessarily focus on their response to critical events, those stories cannot be told without also telling the stories of others with whom they relate at their placements. The final presentation is inevitably complex, tracing the impact that others have on our own lives and attempting to communicate that impact to others in a way that might affect them too. In order to be equal to this complexity, we take practices familiar from the fall writing seminar (in-class peer review and faculty-student conferences outside of class); I also ask students to write a summary reflection comparing the communication potential in each medium relative to the rhetorical occasion of the presentation.

These presentations are about critical reflection. They ask students to think and to talk explicitly about the connection between their service experience and matters of significance that exceed that experience. However, as I suggested above, giving public voice to that reflection might more broadly serve to change the way students conceive of the connection they already have to the broader community. ■

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