

TIME TO WRITE

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE L&S PROGRAM IN
WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

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WRITING AND REFLECTING ON SERVICE: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND STUDENT LEARNING

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Political Science

My teaching goal as a political scientist is to help people become better citizens, and writing and service learning are crucial to achieving that goal.

Service Learning and Citizenship

Writing is an essential part of a course I created in 2001 with the purpose of helping students develop their civic identities. The course is Political Science 425, "Citizenship, Democracy, and Difference." This upper-level undergraduate course enrolls 20 students, many of whom are political science majors.

In this course, we focus on political participation, theories of democracy and citizenship, volunteering and the non-profit sector, and many social divides that simultaneously complicate and enrich our contemporary civic life. The assignments include an extensive journal and two ten-page term papers.



Throughout the term, students' service work as well as the course readings form the basis of our seminar discussions, and students reflect extensively through their writing on their service and its connection to course readings.

Through lecture or discussion alone, my students would not learn to see themselves in relation to others in the community or develop their sense of themselves as citizens. Students make these discoveries on their own because of the reflection that writing requires.

Reflection Through Journaling

From the first day of class, I require students to write three or more times per week in a journal. I expect them to use the journal to reflect on the readings, their service experiences, and the relationships between the two.

Students regularly state in these journals that their work in community sites

is what helps them understand course readings and engage deeply in the course content.

"... each of the students works with a community-based organization throughout the term as another 'text' in the course."

The UW-Madison Morgridge Center for Public Service helped me create this service-learning course, which means that each of the students works with a community-based organization throughout the term as another "text" in the course. The students volunteer three to four hours per week with a community-based organization such as a neighborhood center, a senior center, or an organization focused on immigration, juvenile justice, or domestic violence.

It is through writing that students experience the "aha" moments that make lessons learned in the community stick. Also, through journaling, some students come to recognize that writing is an excellent way to clarify their thoughts. I didn't anticipate this benefit, but I certainly expected journaling to enhance students' abilities to articulate their opinions in the public realm.

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WRITING AND REFLECTING ON SERVICE

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For example, many students use their last journal entries to reflect on the course in general. A recent student in the course wrote the following:

Well, this is it, my last journal for school. I have been inspired by this class to not only continue to write a journal but continue volunteering at [my community center]. . . . I really see the utility of the journal entries in that they allowed a space for reflection.

Term Papers and Writing Fellows

To deepen this ongoing reflection, I design term paper (or position paper) assignments to encourage inquiry into the course material and the world beyond. The first term paper asks students to reflect on the connection between their non-profit site and the policy process. The second asks them to articulate their own conception of good citizenship that they have developed throughout the term.

The success of these papers is due, in part, to the fact that we work with Writing Fellows, undergraduates who are trained to serve as peer writing tutors. Writing Fellows read first versions of the students' papers, comment extensively on them, and then meet with the students in one-on-one conferences. Through this process, students have the opportunity to work out their ideas and improve their communication.

The result is that students' papers are more sophisticated than those I receive in other courses. In particular, the papers in my service-learning course have arguments and consider objections to those arguments. They are a joy to read.

Students Teach Themselves Through Writing

My goal is that students' service helps them develop their own conceptions of good citizenship. Volunteering on its own is valuable, and so are our vibrant class discussions. Without, however, working through their thoughts in their own words, the students would not recognize the lessons about citizenship that volunteering provides, nor would they come to own these insights as part of their civic identities.

In their papers and their journals, students teach themselves what it means to be a good citizen. If I did not require them to reflect on the ways in which the relationships they forge in their service settings compare with what we expect from political science scholarship, they might come away from the course without a lasting notion of how the material matters for their own lives.

They might miss that the one-on-one relationships they develop with youth in neighborhood centers, for example, are part of a type of civic life that they can choose to expand or neglect once they graduate. Through writing, students become active participants in the learning process, and, I hope, in our civic life.

Resources

Morgridge Center for Public Service:
<http://www.morgridge.wisc.edu/>

Writing Fellows:

<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/wf/main.html> ♦

"[T]he papers in my service-learning course have arguments and consider objections to those arguments. They are a joy to read."

WHY SERVICE LEARNING?

Why a special issue of *Time to Write* on service learning?

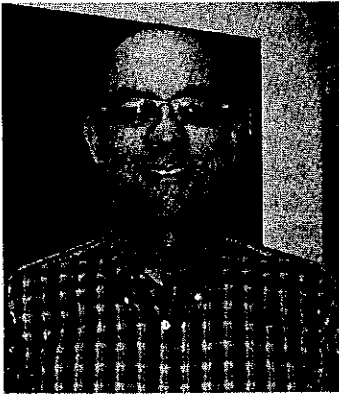
Drawing on the work of compositionists Paul Heilker and Thomas Deans, David Jolliffe* argues that service learning is well suited for writing across the curriculum because both writing and service learning achieve the following:

- help students effectively learn and understand the importance of course content
- inspire pedagogical and curricular innovation
- encourage students to challenge and extend their existing perspectives, as well as try on new ones
- allow students to connect in-class learning with out-of-class experiences
- support cross-disciplinary teaching and learning
- give students practice writing in a range of genres, including journal entries, analytic essays, academic research papers, position papers, and working documents for non-profit organizations.

So writing paired with service learning has the potential for requiring—even motivating—students to become active and engaged learners in our courses. ♦

*"Writing Across the Curriculum and Service Learning: *Kairos*, Genre, and Collaboration." *WAC for the New Millennium*. Eds. Susan H. McLeod, Eric Miraglia, Margot Soven, and Christopher Thaiss. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2001.

LIFE, CHANGE, AND THE CLASSROOM



Michael C. Thornton
Afro-American
Studies and
Faculty Director of
the Morgridge Center

Service learning—that is, learning beyond campus through direct engagement with communities in Madison—ignites

insights and introspection for students that readings and class discussion fail to do.

Until recently, the idea of service had fallen on hard times, especially, in my view, among those who have access to the best of what our country offers. Yet service is once again gaining traction on our college campuses. Many university leaders have advocated service learning and community engagement. Similarly, professional associations—ranging from the American Anthropology Association and the American Political Science Association to the National Science Foundation—support community engagement. There is even a major journal in the field, the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*.

UW-Madison regularly receives honors for the scope and innovation of our service projects, for the percentage of students involved in service activities, and for the extent to which we offer service-learning courses. The University's Morgridge Center for Public Service works in coalition with hundreds of fraternities/sororities, student organizations, and community groups to promote volunteering and community service. Service learning (SL) is one of these efforts.

Why Service Learning?

The key to service learning is that courses link academic study to community service via structured reflection. The emphasis is on students' learning to think critically by using course concepts as a lens to understand and interpret their experience in the nearby community.

Since the activities at sites are shaped through mutual agreement (community partner and professor) as campus-community connections are established,

students gain insight into community environmental, social, and/or political concerns, and they meet people whose lives differ significantly from their own.

Community SL also functions as a tool for students' active involvement in the learning process, which may be especially valuable for those who learn best through experience and teaching others. Research suggests that this active, experiential learning encourages participation and retention of first-generation students and students of color. Thus, SL, as a form of practical experience, enhances learning in all areas of a university's curriculum; reinforces moral and civic values inherent in serving others, heightens the learning curve for course concepts, and increases student retention.

So How Does a Service-Learning Course Work?

The key to SL is aligning the course concepts you want students to learn with what an agency does so that SL brings the course concepts to life.

In one of my undergraduate courses, "Introduction to Contemporary Afro-American Society," for example, the broad topics are race, class, and gender. To emphasize the course learning objectives, this past semester I worked with Centro Hispano, Family Voices, Bayview, Northport/Packer Community Center, UNIDOS Against Domestic Violence, and Lussier Community Center, all of whose missions align with the course concepts.

In weekly journals, students reflect on the following:

1. an assigned reading and what it suggests about the world
2. their service experience that week, especially what they saw, felt, and did at their placement sites
3. the intersection of the reading and service experience—linking the two sections together, using the course idea to examine and explain what

students felt or experienced at their sites.

For example, for one week of the course, prejudice is the topic. Students react to one of the several readings for that week about what the nature of prejudice is, why it persists, who has it (we all do), and how it is a natural (but too often destructive) aspect of our lives.

In a typical entry for this week, students will take the idea of prejudice out of the textbook and into the real

world. Many students will write about how they have no biases toward the people they will be working with, most of whom are of color and/or working class/poor.

"S[ervice learning], as a form of practical experience, enhances learning in all areas of a university's curriculum, reinforces moral and civic values inherent in serving others, heightens the learning curve for course concepts, and increases student retention."

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This professed objectivity alters quickly, however, when students describe what they felt as the visit to the placement site loomed. For instance, the following is a typical entry (with specific prejudices replaced by stand-ins "A" and "B"):

I thought that I carried with me no prejudices about group A. But as I pondered my visit, I became concerned. At the site I immediately felt uneasy, partly because I was the only B there. This surprised me since I have never really interacted with As before and did not know where this fear came from. I am most intrigued at why I was unaware that I held these views of As.

While starting out at this place, by the end of the semester—with constant questioning, prodding, coaxing, and even challenging from other students and from me—most students end up at a very different place both academically and personally.

What Do Students Take Away?

Students' comments reflect common outcomes for this service-learning course. Take these examples:

- "I felt empowered to do something more."
- The course is not only "educational, but it is literally life-changing."
- The course "gives us information that we can actually apply to make both our lives and the lives of others better!"
- The course "made me use what I've learned in class out in my day-to-day life."

As these comments testify, what is especially exciting and promising about SL is the long-lasting influence on students as they choose involvement in their local communities long after graduation. Many who are initially least enamored by its charms, when pushed to service, very often become its greatest advocates. Service, done well and with writing to deepen reflection, leads students to see something much larger than the self. It can open their minds and melt their hearts, breaking the bonds between seemingly disparate characters.

Service learning does not work well for everyone nor for every course. Even so, most students taking a SL course will see a clearer route to linking up with what it takes to bring our country closer to what we should be all about: hope, fairness, and justice for us all. ♦

Beth Godbee, Writing Across the Curriculum

Across campus, many faculty, instructional staff, and ATAs are connecting students with community organizations and initiatives. In this special issue on service learning, you've read about Kathy Cramer Walsh's and Mike Thornton's use of journals and term papers to help students reflect on and learn from their service work. Their articles illustrate how community engagement can broaden our conceptions of writing and shed light on the multiple and sometimes divergent meanings of "writing" across communities.

We can see an interest in community engagement across UW-Madison through student volunteerism, literacy tutoring, and service learning. This community-oriented trend reflects a national interest in what's been called "Writing Across Communities," which conveniently shares an acronym with Writing Across the Curriculum, WAC. In this case, "WAC" focuses on writing in our local communities, whether it occurs in workplaces, non-profits, neighborhood associations, or community centers.

Writing across communities expands our repertoire of writing assignments to include the following:

- reflection journals, position papers, and editorials
- multimedia presentations and video productions
- publicity campaigns, including brochures and flyers
- other written documents designed in consultation with community members and organizations.

Because they often are written for a real audience and for public use, these assignments promote ongoing revision and can deepen students' investment in course material. Patricia Loew from Life Sciences Communication explains:

Students tend to be really motivated to do a good job. They are emotionally and intellectually invested in their projects. In 16 weeks, they learn to work in a team through a simulation that parallels what they'll do beyond school when working with clients. Students learn equal parts people skills, computer skills, and storytelling skills.

At the same time, Randy Stoecker from Rural Sociology reminds us that "serving students and serving the community" may conflict when (1) what the community needs is not students, but already-skilled production specialists or (2) what students want is more time reflecting on service experiences than negotiating final products with community partners. Many instructors address these challenges by developing long-term relationships with community partners and by giving multiple writing assignments.

The following table presents sample assignments from service-learning courses across campus. →

WRITING ACROSS COMMUNITIES

Sample Service-Learning Courses and Assignments

| Instructor and Course | Sample Assignments |
|--|---|
| <p>Patricia Loew Life Sciences Communication 315: "Introduction to Digital Documentary Production"</p> <p>620: "Service Learning in the Life Sciences: Advanced Video Production"</p> | <p>Public Service Announcements and Documentaries In both of these courses, students work in partnership with non-profit organizations (e.g., the Henry Vilas Zoo and Goodman Community Center) to create public service announcements (PSAs) and documentaries. Students regularly receive recognition: for example, LSC 315 student Noel Benedetti won the 2009 ADDY Silver Award, Student Category, for a PSA she developed for the Madison AIDS Network. This spring, students in the LSC 620 course are developing a 30-minute documentary that will be shown at this fall's Environmental Film Festival and at the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Life Science Commission. In addition to video production, students reflect on their service through journal entries discussed in class.</p> |
| <p>Tess Arenas Interdisciplinary / Environmental Studies 400: "Crossing Boundaries: Environmental Justice at the U.S.-Mexico Border"</p> | <p>Study Abroad Reflection Writing Students live in Brownsville, Texas, for approximately 22 days and work in the low-income <i>colonias</i> (neighborhoods on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border) and then attend lectures and take field trips each afternoon. Students write reflection journals and a final paper on the impact of their service learning and classroom experiences in two countries. In 2006, this course received the North American Association of Summer Sessions Creative and Innovative Program Award of Merit.</p> |
| <p>Rebecca Lorimer English 201: "Intermediate Composition: The Writing Food Project"</p> | <p>Farm Profiles, Publicity Materials, and Position Papers Sponsored by a Humanities Exposed (HEX) grant for connecting UW-Madison with the broader Madison community, "The Writing Food Project" offers students in a Comm-B course the opportunity to volunteer at food pantries or community farms and gardens and to collaborate with them on writing for public use—e.g., profiles of local CSA farms or entries for an online "veggie-pedia." Students also write position papers on food issues in the form of articles and editorials to be published in partner newsletters and community newspapers.</p> |
| <p>Karyn Riddle Journalism and Mass Communications 449: "Research and Strategy in Communication Campaigns"</p> | <p>Business Reviews and Strategic Planning Students conduct market research projects and write concise reports, summarizing client businesses, identifying problems and opportunities, and then developing strategic plans. In spring 2008, students worked with Travel Green Wisconsin and wrote an overview of "ecotourism," evaluated the health of the Wisconsin travel industry, and suggested opportunities for campaigns based on consumer trends.</p> |
| <p>Randy Stoecker Rural Sociology: independent or special study courses formed when a community issue arises and a group expresses interest</p> | <p>Projects for Community Organizations Individuals or groups of students develop written materials for community organizations. Together, the students, professor, and community members plan an event to put the results into action, and students then serve as researchers, facilitators, and note-takers. Students write a final report, research paper, or poster for a community research event.</p> |

To find out more about service learning and the role of writing in facilitating reflection, see the following:
Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning *Community Literacy Journal*
<http://www.umich.edu/~mjcs/> <http://www.communityliteracy.org/>

During the current academic year, the University of Wisconsin-Madison has received important national recognition for its commitment to civic engagement and service-learning. Last fall, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching awarded the University the prestigious Community Engagement elective classification, and in February, for the second year in a row, the University was included on the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll. The Morgridge Center for Public Service contributed significantly to both honors. It continues to support faculty and instructional staff across campus in the development of service-learning courses through its resource library, grants program, and consultations with Faculty Director, Professor Michael Thornton (mcthornt@wisc.edu) and Associate Director, Randy Wallar (jrwallar@wisc.edu).

And, as always, the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program is happy to consult about assignment design. Feel free to email us: Brad Hughes (bthughes@wisc.edu) and Beth Godbee (godbee@wisc.edu).

Thanks to Comm-B TA Fellows!



Honored for their outstanding teaching in Comm-B courses, these four TAs helped plan and lead the January 2009 Writing-Across-the-Curriculum training for new Comm-B TAs from across campus.

From left to right:

Shanta Hattikudur,
Psychology

Evelyn Williams, Botany

Hanif Nu'Man, Sociology

Jeannie T. Nguyen,
Classics

**THE NEWSLETTER OF THE L&S
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