

8.

A WRITING CENTER ADMINISTRATOR TEACHES SERVICE LEARNING

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What You Will Learn in this Chapter

- What service learning is and what it entails.
- The importance of intentional kindness and respect in relationships with community partners.
- What a mutually beneficial and collaborative partnership will look like, as well as being mindful of differences and listening to our diverse partner's perspectives.
- Tips on how to get started on your service learning project.

Key Terms

- Service Learning
- Intentional Kindness
- Mindfulness of Difference

What is Service Learning?

Service learning is a way for student assignments and curriculum to become intertwined by working together with community partners, such as K-12 schools, local libraries, and non-profit organizations, in a way that benefits both students and community partners.

As Cushman (1999) states, “When activist fieldwork is a cornerstone of the course, students and community residents can develop reciprocal and dialogic relations with each other; their relationship is a mutually beneficial give-and-take one” (p. 330). Some examples might include working with fifth graders on writing narrative and persuasive essays, helping adults work on resumes and job application materials at a local family crisis services center, or working with a local high school to open a writing center.

Service learning gives you the opportunity to fully participate in a project with others in the community, and learn in a hands-on way that you may not otherwise be able to do in a traditional composition classroom. These projects can be very meaningful, since you are building relationships with community members, learning about them and the issues they face, and taking what you learn to help benefit the community and also yourself (Flower, 2008). It is an opportunity to work with and learn from people who may be similar or different from you, and learn from those differences. As Flower (2008) states “In community-based service learning projects, one uses the role of student, mentor, teacher, researcher, or activist to move beyond the academy and form working relationships across differences of race, class, culture, gender, age, status, or discourse” (p. 3). Moving beyond the academy entails

learning outside of the college classroom, and being actively involved in the community where we will work side by side with community members.

When utilizing service learning in your first year composition course, your writing and actions inform each other. Actions within the community partnership develop critical thinking skills by forcing you to think more deeply about your writing topic, and your writing helps you process your thoughts and adapt your practices within the partnership to better work with participants. Your writing also has practical applications that you and your community partner can put to use, to continually improve the partnership and ultimately help serve the community participants in increasingly beneficial ways.

For the purpose of this chapter, I will be using the community of Stillwater as an example, and drawing from service learning projects I've been involved in with the Oklahoma State University Writing Center, as well as a research project where I interviewed our community partners to get their perspectives on partnerships with the Writing Center and other OSU departments. While we are talking in this chapter about writing as part of your composition class, the examples from the Writing Center are the same types of projects you can participate in as a composition student, and several of the interview excerpts with community partners are also in reference to other OSU partnerships they have, including those with specific classes.

Important Components of Service Learning

Intentional Kindness

Another way to think of service learning is as kindness in action. And not just kindness in the sense of being nice to someone, but as Boquet (2015) states, “Kindness, however, is really a habit, an orientation, something we practice and, indeed, can become better at. Kindness is something we practice in relation to community, and some kindnesses are not associated with any one individual but with a sense of collective purpose” (p. 25-26). We can be intentional in our kindness through action in service learning, in making sure we know what the community partner’s goals are, that we are working in a way that benefits those we are working with, and creating that mutual respect with the partners.

Goldblatt (2007) emphasizes another aspect of the importance of intentionality: “And if one pursues a vision of writing or literacy instruction that goes beyond the campus, indeed beyond the curriculum, there is all the more reason to understand that program in its very specific locale, based on the kinds of students in the university, the economic climate of the region, the state of the public and private schools in the area, and many other crucial considerations, both contemporary and historical” (p. 9). As an example using the city of Stillwater, the community has about a third of the population living below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau (2019), and about 41% of the children in the local public school district qualify for the free and reduced lunch program (Neal as qtd by Bitton (2018). So in evaluating this, we can think about the program at the children’s museum in town which charges an admission cost, versus the public library, where the programs are free. And even more so, the programs at the actual schools themselves, where students already are and have transportation to and from school.

Another example that one of our interviewees, Joy, gave was that, because time during school is already jam packed with needed curriculum, and after school programs make it difficult for students who are bus riders, an interested volunteer program instituted a reading buddies program during breakfast time, which is when the bus riders and other early arrivers would be there and before school starts: “There is this little window of time, when they’re eating breakfast... [when] they are able to sit with their reading buddy and read and eat a breakfast. So we really are able to catch those kids because those same kids wouldn’t be able to stay after school most likely” (Joy, interview). So for this particular school in Stillwater, that breakfast time “could be a real avenue to get some of those kiddos that we wouldn’t be able to reach after school” (Joy, interview). If we are being intentional about planning a time when many of the students from lower socioeconomic homes are going to be at school, will work with teacher schedules and not take time from necessary instruction, plus making sure transportation isn’t an issue for students, this breakfast time frame is a way to intentionally plan a service learning project with the school.

Respect

One of the most important components of service learning is the attitude we have when meeting the community partners, and talking with them about what we will be working on together. Our community partners are immersed in the community and are in touch with both the strengths and needs of the community. They are the community experts, if you will, and fully equal partners. As Flower (2008) states, “teaching ourselves to see and affirm the deep springs of agency in others is a prerequisite to a dialogue” (p. 200). To truly have a productive conversation based in respect, we need to view our community partners as having valuable input and insights.

What I mean by respect not only has to do with our view of the community partners, but in how we interact and treat them, and setting goals with them, rather than for them. We will want to have a meeting with the partners ahead of time to make sure that the plans for the service learning project will be beneficial for everyone. Rousculp (2014), who writes about a rhetoric of respect, says this: “Engaging within a rhetoric of respect draws attention to how we use language in relation with others: how we name and classify, how we collaborate, how we problem-solve. Whereas respect itself may exist as a feeling, a rhetoric of respect requires discursive action” (p. 25). So respect is more than a feeling, and includes us having a conversation between equals, where we actually act on the information and feedback from our community partners.

In an interview with one of our community partners, Earl, he says it this way, in regards to collaboration between the public schools and OSU: “All parent engagement stuff these days tells you that if you really want parents engaged, then you really don’t want them to come to you as you’re the parent, I’m the teacher, you know nothing about your child’s education, I know everything. [Instead] You are going to spend half the day with the child, so you know stuff about your child that I need to know in order to make this work, and I have stuff to share with you that’s going to help. And if we do this as a collaboration between the two of us, and not that I’m the educational god then good things happen. But if you don’t approach it that way, it doesn’t work as smoothly as it should” (Earl, interview). Earl reiterates here what Flower and Rousculp tell us. If we are going to engage in a service learning partnership in our community, we need to treat it as a true collaboration, and listen to our partners with their insights and perspectives, and come to an agreement together on what the service learning components will entail by mediating the relationship through respect.

Beneficial for Both Researcher and Community Partner

The work you do with the community partner will help you gain a more in depth and meaningful understanding into a community, but it’s also important to keep in mind that the partner institution’s needs are just as important as your learning. Goldblatt (2007) points out, “To partner with schools and community organizations, a postsecondary institution must be clear about its self-interests and the interests of its partners; it must be willing to negotiate with partners over the direction of a project in a way that benefits all participants” (p. 6). And as Royster (1996) states, “It seems to me that the agreement for inquiry and discovery needs to be deliberately reciprocal” (p. 33). In collaborative projects, our ideas and objectives will take shape when we meet and refine them with the community partners. The project may change somewhat and look different than we initially imagined it, but our definitions of success and achievement need to be from meeting both groups’ goals and respecting the needs of all.

Earl put it succinctly when he brought up, “I guess my thought is, when someone wants to do research in the [public] schools, and we don’t necessarily always have the best attitudes towards everyone that’s at the university either, so everyone needs to have an open mind and sit down and go, what is it that we need to accomplish, what can we do that has a mutual goal, and then accomplish that, whatever that may be” (Earl, interview). One example of a way we can do this is by designing our service learning project goals to intersect with what our community partners are doing as well. So if you’re working with fifth graders on writing essays and want to see how effective different strategies are, and the classroom is focused on writing a persuasive essay with evidence, then gearing your strategies around writing a persuasive essay will not only help the fifth graders by having multiple levels of scaffolding, but will also help the teachers by giving students more focused practice on what they are learning in class. Joy said it this way: “I think as much as possible, asking us what will help us too. . . it is a challenge to give up time, so any time we can align what we need with what you all

need I think that's the most beneficial" (Joy, interview). This view of reciprocity also directly ties in with intentionality, as tying in with both groups' needs will in turn be beneficial for participants.

Mindfulness of Difference

Our kindness and listening are only the first steps in this mutually beneficial partnership based on respect. Many times, we may work with people from different backgrounds, countries, cultures, races, etc, than ourselves. Our service learning experience is an opportunity for us to learn from people different from ourselves, about their history, their perspective, and to broaden our own perspectives. Truly interacting with and becoming part of a community includes caring about that community, and becoming invested in work to help change injustices and work for equitable treatment. For example, when working with community members from marginalized groups, such as students of color, Garcia (2017) states that: "in resisting the retrofitting and/or reductionism of students of color, I focus on cultivating a mindfulness of difference by describing the geo, body, and mobile politics of knowledge that students... carry with them. In these ways, listening is functional and operational towards actional and decolonial work" (p. 33). While Garcia is specifically talking about a writing center, this idea very much applies to composition classrooms, as well. What kind of listening can we do with our community partners, and what should we see in our actions as a result of this listening? Part of our intentionality and respect is letting people be themselves, and valuing their experiences, their knowledge, and respecting their right to speak for themselves and what they think instead of what we think they are saying and who we think they are.

As an example, Royster (1996), a Black professor of English, speaks of some of her experiences when partnering with others. She points out some of the disrespectful ways in which she has been treated, and gives us an idea of how our treatment of others may undermine our partnerships: "What am I compelled to ask when veils seem more like walls is who has the privilege of speaking first? How do we negotiate the privilege of interpretation? When I have tried to fulfill my role as negotiator, I have often walked away knowing that I have spoken, but also knowing, as Anna Julia Cooper knew in 1892, that my voice, like her voice, is still a muted one. I speak, but I cannot be heard. Worse, I am heard but I am not believed. Worse yet, I speak but I am not deemed believable" (p. 36). A mindfulness of difference not only includes being respectful of differences, but also being aware of some of the subconscious biases we may have, and being intentional about fully respecting our community partners and participants who may be different than us, and making sure we are actually taking them as an expert and hearing and valuing what they say.

How a Service Learning Project Works

Writing a Multivoiced Inquiry (Flower, 2008, p. 230-232)

Frame a Question

Take time to think through what you are interested in learning about and investigating in regards to the people and program you are working with. Look up information about the partner organization before meeting with them so that you have an idea about the population and what types of activities the community partner is engaged in. Meet with the community partner to hear from them, and find out their thoughts on the work they do and the people in their community who they work with. Then you'll be ready to formulate your research questions with the community partner to make sure they are mutually beneficial.

Bring Multiple Voices to the Table

When planning your project, "design a research plan that collects interpretations and analyses of your problem from at least three different kinds of participants, sources, or perspectives" (Flower, 2008, p. 231). Three is not a fixed number, but the objective is to have multiple voices and perspectives.

With my project, I interviewed people from multiple organizations we partner with, people in diverse positions in those

organizations (for example, an administrator, a principal, and a teacher at a local public school). I did not interview parents or students/participants, though, which would be a helpful and valuable perspective. Additionally, I read applicable pieces in composition and rhetoric, as well as writing center studies, on community partnerships and service learning. I supplemented these with personal observations from participating in community engagement projects myself with the OSU Writing Center.

Reflect Multiple Voices in Your Text

In addition to listening to multiple voices when you are doing your research, make sure to include those various voices in your project. For example, in this text that you are reading, I draw from multiple community partners, service learning and rhetoric scholars, and my experiences.

Methods for Working with Intercultural Inquiry (Flower, 2008)

For the methods you use for working on your project, Flower suggests utilizing: working with texts, observations, interviews, and dialogues (Flower, 2008, p. 237-240). As an example, for interviews, you will want to think about how you would record the interview, if you want to have a structured or semi-structured interview, and if you would want to transcribe the entire interview or focus on parts that you found most helpful. Another thing to keep in mind is that if you plan to publish or present information about your project at a conference (as well as any project that involves human subjects), you will need to get permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at your institution.

In addition to the practical aspects, we also need to think about how we enact those methods. As Garcia points out, “At the center of this design should be a new, not merely renewed, practice of listening: listening as a form of understanding and action” (p. 51). One way we truly listen to our community partners and participants is by changing our own actions and practices based on what we are learning from our partners. Our methods should be changing as we go about our project, as we work to incorporate those multiple voices, both in our text we create and in the way we are working with our community partners.

As a final note, we need to keep in the forefront of our minds that we are working with actual people, and that our actions can have long term effects. Aja Martinez, a Mexican-American English professor at the University of North Texas, talks about her experiences growing up, and how she was treated/perceived when she was a student, and how those various interactions influenced how she saw herself. Martinez (2016) recounts how she started out as a child seeing herself as a writer, but later, through interactions with various teachers, began to question that identity, including a professor who gave her a B+++++ but said that because she was a not a native English speaker (which, in fact, Martinez actually is a native English speaker) that she wouldn’t be able to write to a certain level.

Our interactions with participants in our service learning project can have a major impact on participants, whether positive or negative, and so we need to keep in mind kindness and a mindfulness of difference, as well as being positive and helping empower participants when we interact. The service learning project you participate in should benefit you as a writer, your community partners, and ultimately, the participants you are working with.

Tips

- Be aware of deadlines with potential partners, for example, Stillwater’s local school district only takes applications twice a year for staff to be involved in IRB research projects with OSU.
- Do some research to see what departments on campus you could collaborate with who already have established community partnerships. This is one way to make sure that those community relationships are consistent even though students come and go.
- Go to the correct contact for the organization – for example, Stillwater Public Schools has a SPS liaison for all OSU partnerships.
- Make sure to prioritize student safety, and let them know they can come to you if any issue arises with the community partner.

- Work with your FYC director to make sure it is approved and the partnerships will continue even when you are no longer teaching comp
- Note: Be ethical/accurate in how you reflect your project and what comes from it. One of the community partners told me before recording the interview, and showed me on a website, of a partner who misquoted the community partners and the quotes painted participants in a negative light. This damaged the community partner's relationship with participants. These community relationships are built on trust, and it's important to not take advantage of that by exaggerating in order to make our projects look better.
- On the other hand, if something negative has happened, you should be honest about that, too. Issues can happen with community partners. If you encounter anything troubling or that makes you uncomfortable, contact your instructor or the FYC director and go from there.
- Always be prepared to revise your goals and plans based on what you are learning as you participate in the project.

Discussion Questions

- Thinking of Boquet's definition of intentional kindness that "Kindness, however, is really a habit, an orientation, something we practice and, indeed, can become better at. Kindness is something we practice in relation to community, and some kindnesses are not associated with any one individual but with a sense of collective purpose" (p. 25-26), what strategies could you utilize to foster a partnership based on the principles of intentional kindness and mutual respect?
- What steps can we take to cultivate listening with empathy and planning out our service learning project collaboratively with community partners?
- Before meeting with your community partners: Think about your potential partners and what questions you will want to ask in order to gain the information needed to be intentional and create a mutually beneficial partnership. What are other resources you can consult to prepare for the meeting? For example, if you are in Stillwater and planning to work with the public school district, you could look at the Stillwater Public Schools website in advance, and the city of Stillwater's information on the population and demographics as a starting point to learn about the community and population.
- After you've completed your service learning project, reflect on how successful you were on incorporating intentional kindness and listening. What changes would you make for future partnerships?

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