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ABSTRACT

Students entering the university have to create a space for themselves, not only in the writing classroom, but in their relationships with faculty, other students, and their evolving selves. A curricular support mechanism helps students enlarge their educational process. Such a support system, the Linked Courses Program, has been in operation at George Mason University since the fall of 1992. Designed primarily to provide comprehensive support for first-semester freshmen, the program links various introductory courses in disciplines such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, government, philosophy, communication, and biology with designated sections of first-year composition (FYC). One link is the Community Services Link (CSL), a 3-way cluster joining introductory sociology, University 100 (a credit course for transition into the university), and FYC. The pedagogy of FYC, taught in a computer classroom, was based on the writing process model. "Writing to learn" and "writing to show learning" assignments were used in the sociology class. E-mail and field notes were also used effectively. The underlying premise of the sociology course was the concept of the sociological imagination--the capacity to see interrelations between an individual's biography and his/her time and place. As part of University 100, students formed a socially active community through the service component of the CSL. They performed community service in an elementary school located in an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse neighborhood and were given opportunities to connect their experiences with the concepts they were studying in FYC and sociology. (CR)

# Applied Scholarship in the Community Service Link: From Classroom Texts to Classroom as Text

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Students entering the university have to create a space for themselves, not only in the writing classroom but in their relationships with faculty, other students, and their evolving selves. In addition, they have to get used to disciplinary ways of knowing and disciplinary attitudes about what constitutes literacy. Their success in these endeavors determines, to a large degree, their academic success and their willingness to continue their education at our institutions. At the same time, we as educators would like to instill in our students the desire and the means to be critically thinking, socially concerned participants in a democratic society. This process takes time and may initially be met with student resistance, as we ask them to actively participate in a systematic social and cultural critique. To this end, we need a curricular support mechanism for our students in their enlarging educational process.

Such a support system, the Linked Courses Program, has been in operation at George Mason University since the fall of 1992. A culturally diverse suburban institution, GMU has a student body of over twenty thousand students, 80% of whom commute. Designed primarily to provide comprehensive support for freshmen during their first semester at GMU, the program links various introductory courses in disciplines such as Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, Government, Philosophy, Communication, and Biology with designated sections of First Year Composition (FYC). While most of these links have been made between large lecture sections and FYC, others have been more direct matches between sections.

One such "close" link is the Community Service Link (CSL), the one in which I teach. The CSL is a three-way cluster joining Introductory Sociology, and University 100 (a one-credit course to help students with their transition into GMU), with FYC. The CSL reflects four current trends in postsecondary education: Writing Across the Curriculum by fostering writing in Sociology; Computers and Writing by providing students access to word processing and online asynchronous communication; Service-Learning by incorporating community service with academic work; and Learning Communities by placing students in closely linked courses with an experiential component. All forty students were in one section of Introductory Sociology but were divided into two sections of FYC and University 100; I taught both sections of FYC and University 100, coordinated the community service, and attended the Sociology class.

The underlying premise of Introductory Sociology was the concept of the sociological imagination, defined as the capacity to see interrelations between an individual's biography and her/his time and place. The course centered on three sociological themes, each with its specific focus and readings. Social Movements focussed on Native Americans, especially the Quiche of Guatemala, and was based on the book *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, the autobiographic account of Rigoberta Menchu, the Quiche Indian woman who won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work on behalf of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala. Social Roles focussed on gender roles and was based on excerpts from the book *Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement, and College Culture*, Holland and Eisenhart's ethnographic look from a feminist perspective of the effects of peer pressure on college women to be

romantically involved with men. Social Institutions focussed on education with readings from Kozol's *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools.*

As part of University 100, students formed a socially active community through the service component of the CSL. Students performed community service two hours a week for nine weeks in an elementary school located in an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse neighborhood about twenty miles from the GMU campus. Students worked in the same classroom setting with one group of students at grade levels matched as closely to the desires of the CSL students and the needs of the teachers as possible. Their tasks in these classrooms varied but primarily allowed them to interact with students. This community service provided experiential grounding for sociological concepts focussing primarily on gender roles and on education as a social institution.

I taught FYC in a computer classroom. In addition to learning to compose and revise their papers on computer, students participated in asynchronous assignments via email. We also applied critical/close reading skills to the texts we read in Introductory Sociology, approaching them from a "readerly/writerly" perspective. For example, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* was based on extensive interviews, which resulted in a total of 24 four hours of tape and a transcript of 500 pages. These interviews had been conducted by the anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray in Spanish, a language that Rigoberta had only begun to learn three years previously. Burgos-Debray then had to compile the information on the tapes. Her work, as we read it, had subsequently been translated into English by Ann Wright. In FYC we discussed issues of representation in this text: how can we know whose story was truly being told as we read it? how can pieces of data be re/compiled differently to tell different stories?

who gets to say which story is definitive? In another example, while studying gender roles in light of *Educated in Romance*, we addressed issues dealing with qualitative research in general and ethnographic research in particular.

Writing was an important aspect in all three components of the CSL. The pedagogy of FYC, the most obvious of the three components to focus on writing, was based on the writing process model, in which students became aware, in varying degrees, of their own writing processes and were exposed to ways of composing, revising, and editing to suit the needs of a particular rhetorical situation. The Sociology professor also used writing in her course in two major ways: "writing to learn" assignments, in which she provided prompts designed to help students focus/clarify their thinking about the sociological issues under discussion and "writing to show learning" assignments, in which students wrote responses to their readings and activities assigned outside of class.

Writing was also evident in the email communication we used in FYC and University 100 to keep in touch. Occasionally, I asked students to write reflectively on an issue that had grown out of their CSL courses. For example, about the third week of their community service, I noticed that several students were reporting concern in their field notes (I'll have more to say about the field notes later) about the role they were supposed to take at the magnet elementary school where they were doing their community service. Were they students? adults? teachers? The student with whom they were working from kindergarten through fifth grade viewed them as adults because they attended college or because they could drive. And yet the CLS students, as first year students who had only recently graduated from high school, found the adult role a bit strange. During this time we were discussing in

Introductory Sociology the sociological concept dealing with social roles. And so I asked them to define the three specific concepts we had been discussing--social status, social role, and role conflict--and apply them to their situation at the elementary school.

On another occasion, after students had been involved in their community service at the magnet school for several weeks, I asked them via email to define/explain the phrase 'magnet school' and tell us how they had decided on their definition. I used their responses to help us examine how different individuals can use the same term--in this case, 'magnet school'--to mean different things. In addition, I asked them to share their sources for these meanings, which we then evaluated in terms of the "authority" of the source.

One use of email that I had not anticipated occurred toward the end of the term, at about the same time we were discussing issues related to making social policy in Introductory Sociology. From our discussion, it had become apparent that constructing social policy can be a messy business when various groups, each with their own stake in the policy, try to work together. While I was waiting for the CSL students at the end of a session at the magnet school one afternoon, a male student commented to me that they had to do a lot of work in writing their field notes for just 10% of the course grade. I decided to use his comment as an opportunity to allow CSL students to experience constructing social policy for themselves. And so, I reminded him that he had access to everyone in both classes via our email distribution list if he wanted to see if he could drum up support for a proposal to change the grading policy.

At first, the email exchanges were quite active. I added comments reminding them that I, as their audience for any change in grading policy, needed to be presented with

evidence and sound reasoning, not simply comments that writing the field notes took "a lot of time" or that they had other classes, if I were to be persuaded. After a few days, I stopped receiving messages and so I thought that the discussion had stopped. However, a week later, when the students were to supposed to present their proposal to me, I discovered that someone had created a distribution list for both classes and had left me off of it; students had been discussing the issue without me. I realize that this student-oriented interaction could be seen as subversive and even unnerving to some teachers; however, as a teacher committed to the use of a critical/participatory pedagogy in Ira Shor's terms, I was pleased that my students had taken control not only of the discussion but my access to it. As it turned out, they could not come to a consensus about how they wanted the percentage changed or why a new percentage was justified. Still I did not consider this email exercise a total loss. The students had experienced first hand the "messiness" and frustration of constructing social policy.

The linchpin of the CSL was the field notes, which students wrote as a means of processing their service-learning experience. Written after each session, these field notes provided opportunities for CSL students to report/reflect on their community service and to relate that experience to concepts presented in the Sociology course. The field notes were divided into three sections. In the **Observation** section, students were asked to write about what they observed/perceived in a session, regardless of what they were doing. In my responding to this section, I was able to provide contextual feedback to help students learn to distinguish between the recounting of what they had observed and what they had inferred from that observation, a necessary ability in the development of critical thinking. In the **Reflection/Analysis** section, students were asked to reflect on their community service

experience after each session. In this section, they wrote about whatever they chose, to include complaining about the tasks they had been asked to do, recalling/connecting with their own experience in elementary school, wondering about student behavior, or offering hypotheses about their observations.

In the **Question** section, students were asked to write questions concerning their experiences in the elementary magnet school setting. These questions helped them to problematize their experience and to connect their experiential learning with the more vicarious and abstract material presented in the Introductory Sociology class. In addition, these questions offered a contextualized opportunity for categorization and led to topics for their researched paper. Each of the first four weeks, I compiled a list of the twenty or so most representative questions from the field notes, finally duplicating the list of eighty or so questions for students to categorize, first as individuals and subsequently in small groups. Working in small groups, they had to present a rationale for the way they had constructed their individual categories, ultimately reaching some kind of consensus.

Through all these assignments, by helping students negotiate between the experiences they were having in the magnet school with the reading and writing they were doing in Introductory Sociology and FYC, we encouraged them to develop their critical thinking skills, to take control of their own learning, and to become agents of social change. Toward the end of the semester, the Sociology professor asked students to do a critical analysis of their field work based on their field notes; she commented to me that the analyses submitted by the majority of our CSL students demonstrated analytical skills whicn rivaled if not surpassed the analytical skills of many of her Sociology majors as juniors and seniors..

Students in the Community Service Link were given opportunities to connect their experiences in the elementary school classrooms with the concepts they were studying in both FYC and Introductory Sociology. In addition, we were supporting their access to the university and to their own critical ways of interacting with university culture and, we hoped, with the culture beyond GMU.

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