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Social Responsibility, Critical Analysis, and Literary Studies: Continuing Conversations About Service Learning

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Abstract

The use of service learning in university courses can be limited depending on the class and the subject matter. In this article, the authors provide examples of two teachers' experiences with service learning in literature courses, showing service learning can have a home in fields of study where it might not initially seem to belong. The authors encourage instructors, whether in literature or other academic disciplines, to consider ways in which a service-learning pedagogy can be used in their classes.

Keywords: Service learning, critical pedagogy, literary studies, women's literature, environmental literature.

Service learning continues to find success in classrooms across the country, with many university courses employing projects that enhance students' learning by encouraging active participation in the community outside of academia. Service learning's roots are established in critical pedagogy, which Giroux (2011) describes as the "educational imperative to encourage students to act on the knowledge, values, and social relations they acquire by being responsive to the deepest and most important problems of our time" (p. 14). Critical pedagogy, Giroux states, "is about encouraging students to take risks, act on their sense of social responsibility, and engage the world as an object of both critical analysis and hopeful transformation" (p. 14). Through service learning, students learn to become active thinkers and active citizens at the same time. Mitchell (2008) argues that service learning has recently "experienced a shift from a traditional model of a pedagogy that merely encourages students to take part in community projects to one that encourage students to see themselves as agents of social change, and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities" (p. 51). This shift insists that service learning is not only for the benefit of the student as an individual, but for the greater good. Taking these practices further, Mitchell argues that to truly make a change in society, students must investigate and understand "the root causes of social problems and the courses of action necessary to challenge and change the structures that perpetuate those problems" (p. 53).

While service-learning certainly has merit, the pedagogy fits more obviously and more seamlessly into some academic courses than others. In the field of English, for example,

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while service learning is often associated with first-year composition courses, literary studies is typically overlooked as being a suitable site for service-learning pedagogy. Literature courses emphasize the reading and critical analysis of texts, often historical ones; therefore, a pedagogy that invites students to take social action doesn't inherently seem to apply.

We argue that service learning can facilitate the understanding that Mitchell advocates, even when the pedagogy is not an obvious fit with course subject matter or when other challenges exist. For instance, many scholars have questioned the relevance of service learning to literature courses. Specifically, Grobman (2005) has asked whether the service-learning aspect may "undermine literary studies rather than imbue it" (p. 129) with cultural significance, questioning whether or not a literary text loses meaning when combined with service projects. However, after adopting the pedagogy in her own class, Grobman (2007) has asserted that service learning can be successful when the literature closely parallels the cultural issues the students confront in their service and the educator emphasizes the value of literature "as a form of creative expression with the power to do cultural work" (p. 90). Choosing texts that illustrate social issues similar to the ones students face when working with the community may have more impact on the students' learning, as they begin to make connections between their world and the literary texts they read in the classroom. In fact, this connection between the texts students read and the service they perform can benefit many classes across the disciplines, not just literature-based courses.

The following article furthers the conversation surrounding service learning pedagogy, providing examples of two teachers' experiences with service learning: one face-to-face Women and Literature course and the other an online Literature and Environment course. Using literary texts that support the service projects, these examples illustrate Grobman's (2007) idea of incorporating literature that encourages students "to think more deeply about the power of literary texts to challenge dominant ideas and structures" (p. 91). The first example discusses service learning that is applicable to a local community and women's rights within that community, while the second considers a national effort, focusing the service around the Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill. We wanted to pair these examples because they demonstrate a range of opportunities: classroom instruction and online instruction, local activism and national activism, as well as literature from different content areas. The article insists that it is possible to educate students to become active citizens within classes that do not seem amenable to service learning; however, to ensure the pedagogy's success, we as educators must strive to revisit our existing curriculum and make changes to incorporate lessons that empower students. We encourage and challenge our readers to consider ways to restructure their own curricula to include empowering projects that can effect change—change within the students and the world in which they live. Whether readers teach literature or other subjects that seem unsuited to service learning, we hope our models help broaden instructors' understanding of the possibilities of using service learning in their classes.

Writing About Service

In recent decades, the importance of fostering social responsibility through a university education has been on the rise. However, Hersh and Schneider (2005) point out that the philosophical perspectives that guide this ideal were actually foundational in the creation of the American post-secondary educational system. The "cultivation of virtues associated with […] 'personal and social responsibility,'" the authors explain, was intended to be a guiding principle for American liberal arts colleges. Hersh and Schneider (2005) state that over the twentieth century, the academy became increasingly uncomfortable preparing "morally astute individuals who will positively contribute" to the world around them. Education became focused more exclusively on subject matter. The authors state, "We know we can teach students organic chemistry; we know we can teach them Keynesian economics and the history of the Italian Renaissance. But if that is all we do, then we have failed them." Students, Hersh and Schneider argue, "need passion with a conscience, passion imbued with a keen sense of responsibility." Even in a literature class, teachers can strive to instill students with this "passion with a conscience" and "passion [with] responsibility." Service-learning projects, which can take many forms, can give students a sense of agency making a difference toward the solution of community problems.

Deans (2000) explains that service learning projects that strive toward solving community problems are typically divided into three categories: "writing *for* the community; writing *about* the community; and writing *with* the community" (p. 15). Deans acknowledges that each category is a reductive look at the complexities of actual programs; however, the categorization can help instructors focus their pedagogy. Both of the classes described in this article focus on "writing *about* the community" projects, wherein the students completed service assignments and then wrote critical reflections. Deans states, "Gaining lived experience through working with people in need can open new perspectives for students, particularly as they write about complex social issues" (p. 18). In such courses, the writing emphasizes "personal reflection, social analysis, and/or cultural critique" (p. 18). Such writing-*about*-service courses, Deans says, "tend to advance academic and critical literacy goals" (p. 18). In addition, Bringle and Hatcher (1996) claim that reflection is a critical component to service learning, as reflections bridge the gap between their experiences and the content of the course.

In the sections that follow, we have included two examples from two different literature courses, illustrating the range of ways that writing-*about*-community can be utilized in classrooms. The accompanying writing projects and what the students learned about civic engagement were very different. Therefore, this article, we hope, will provide an argument for the inclusion of writing-*about*-community projects as well as two distinctive examples of such projects in use.

Students enrolled in the two classes to be discussed were English and non-English majors alike at the University of Montana Western, a small satellite campus of the University of Montana system, located in a rural region and composed of about 1,200 students. Approximately 80% of the student population was Caucasian, and a large majority of the

students came from rural communities. Our goals for these courses were to emphasize critical literacy—specifically with the texts being studied in the course—as well as to advance the academic writing capabilities of the students. The courses, while concentrated on different literary foci, were intended to increase students' critical thinking. We wanted the students to learn the material covered in the texts, but moreover we wanted them to take a broader perspective to the written material, applying what they read to the world around them. We wanted the students to think critically and analytically: about the literature, about the social and environmental movements the literature related to, and about their own beliefs, preconceptions, and prior level of understanding regarding the material covered in the courses.

Example 1—Women and Literature: Fostering Social Awareness

In the spring of 2010, Instructor A taught the Women and Literature course described here. The instructor, believing that real-world context is an essential element in fostering social awareness, actively sought ways to incorporate service learning into the curriculum. Students read empowering texts by and about women while working with a local women's shelter. Zlotkowski, Balliet, and Heffernan (2000) claim that service learning can benefit women's studies, as many courses within this discipline often discuss historical instances of women's activism. A service-learning project could extend the curricular goals of the course while prompting students to participate in their own forms of activism as well.

The literary texts that informed the service project included readings within Gilbert and Gubar's (1996) *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English*, a key text that spans the history of women writers from 1170 to present day. The students also read newer texts regarding activism, including *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* by Muscio (2002); *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* by Baumgardner and Richards (2002); and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* by hooks (1984). A wide array of seminal texts combined with newer pieces encouraged students to investigate the contradictions between what it means to be a woman in today's society versus what it meant in earlier historical periods. When read from literary and social standpoints, these texts were meant to prompt students to question how literary texts contribute to society, how texts authored by women differ from those written by men, and how or if these texts add value to their education. From a social standpoint, students read the texts and applied their experiences to the readings. The service aspect was meant to enhance the meaning of the text and provide for stronger, more personal interpretation.

Having worked at a women's shelter in a different community during her undergraduate studies, the instructor formed a relationship with the local shelter to see what students could do to help. A few weeks into the class, the students started their service project. The first step was to establish a meeting with the director of the shelter, where they were met with a major challenge from the very beginning. Because of legal issues, the director indicated that students could not work one-on-one with the women who lived at the shelter, which meant they had to find other ways to contribute. To maintain its anonymity,

the whereabouts of the actual shelter had to remain unknown, and the students were only allowed to visit the shelter's headquarters located in town. As a class, students toured the facility and became familiar with the shelter's services and needs.

When discussing what they could do to help, the director suggested the students could help stuff envelopes. Needless to say, the students were a little disheartened with this idea. Forbes, Garber, Kensinger, and Slagter (1995) describe this type of service work as "observation rather than activism" (p. 164), arguing that service learning has to incorporate the needs of the instructor, the organization, and the students participating in order to be successful. They warn of the impending frustration that can arise when students are asked to participate in "tedious" service work without direct contact with the community. Instead, the service project must help students see themselves as "agents capable of acting with others to build coalitions, foster public awareness, and create social change" (p. 167). A more active role in the project may ensure that students recognize their potential to become agents of social change.

Wanting more active roles, the students met with the director again. This time, they gained a better understanding of the issues their clientele were facing. They learned that the majority of women who utilized the shelter's services were women escaping abusive situations, young mothers seeking assistance, and teens seeking help with health care. While they couldn't work one-on-one with the clientele, they found other ways to help, including adding to the shelter's library and educating the local community regarding women's issues. Throughout the semester, students discussed ways to do both effectively, and while both are equally important, perhaps more important to the course outcomes was the discussion of the literature they might provide to the shelter's clientele.

When discussing what texts to contribute, students focused on readings that might both empower and educate women. As they were reading a mix of historical and contemporary texts, this was not an easy task; some students thought the historical texts provided important historical context, while others thought the newer readings focused on more current events that women could relate to on a personal level. In the end, they all agreed the shelter's library should reflect a mix of historical and current literature—the same mix they read in class. At the end of the semester, several of students donated their own texts to the library.

The students indicated that they wanted to do more than donate literature, and they turned to the shelter's director again for guidance. The director commented that their female clientele often left their homes with nothing—no shoes, no clothes, no toiletries. To make the transition to the shelter more comfortable for these women, the students organized a community clothing drive, asking local businesses for donations. To solicit these donations, students created posters and flyers they displayed in storefront windows. Several businesses donated clothing and hygienic items, including make-up and personal care products. In the end, the students received enough donations to create ten baskets for the shelter. Each basket held one item of clothing and five toiletry items, which created enough baskets for every current resident of the shelter to receive her own.

For their final project, the students turned their focus on ways to advocate for women's rights in the community. One of the texts in the course included *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, wherein author hooks (1984) prompts women to focus their attention on "mass outreach with the intention of taking feminism out of the university and into the streets and homes of this society" (p. 111). With hooks' challenge in mind, students held a Women's Exposition at the end of the semester, showcasing their final projects produced in the class, which included writing an analysis of a women's issue in society and designing a poster presentation, complete with distributable literature. The issues presented included birth control options, women's health care, domestic violence, and STDs. The Expo lasted for four hours, and approximately fifty people attended at various times. The students asked the university library to showcase their presentations for a week so that community members who could not attend the Expo could stop by at their leisure, and they hung flyers in the community to let people know the presentations were still on display.

The conclusion of the service-learning assignment in the class consisted of structured reflection on the course, including the service project. Following Grobman's (2007) lead, students synthesized their experiences with the texts they read, writing metacognitive reflections. As Deans (2000) as well as Bringle and Hatcher (1996) show us, reflection is a critical component to service learning. Reflecting on the course outcomes, students wrote critical analyses, discussing ways in which the texts they read informed their service. They were able to see firsthand the issues presented in the texts they read, making women's issues more real. Arguably, this service learning project also made the historical texts more approachable, as it helped bridge the gap between older and newer generations, illuminating the need for activism at all points in history, including today.

In the end, the students indicated they were happy with the service project, as it truly spanned the service-learning continuum, from charity to advocacy, having immediate *and* lasting impact on the community (Morton, 1995). In their journals, several students commented specifically on the use of the book *Cunt* and how they failed to realize the current issues facing women today until reading the text. Many of these same students focused their reflections around Muscio's discussion of female violence, linking this issue specifically to the work they did for the shelter. Above all, they recognized that they were able to impact society, thereby meeting Muscio's challenge to her readers. Further, because they were able to have a voice in their service project, the project became more meaningful and lasting for them as active members of the community they were trying to help. In fact, several of the students stayed on to work with the shelter after completion of the course, and others volunteered their time at other women's resource centers, including the local health department. This continuation of service indicates the potential of service learning to promote active citizenry even long after the students' academic endeavors.

Example Two—Literature and the Environment: Responding to Ecological Disaster

In May 2010, Instructor B was scheduled to teach an online summer course, a 100-level environmentally themed literature class. This course, a general-education option among

several themed humanities courses, asked students to read texts that "probe the idea of being at home in the natural world, considering ways in which the physical environment directly affects human lives and, vice versa, how humans affect the environment." The class was offered online, and the students would be scattered throughout rural Montana.

As the instructor was finalizing the syllabus, he was reading daily news articles about what was happening as a result of the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig in a BP-operated region of the Gulf of Mexico. Millions of gallons of oil had already spewed into the Gulf, killing various aquatic animals and shore birds, and crippling the region's fishing and tourism businesses. Suddenly, the textbook readings, the nature journals, and the writing assignments that were planned, while still important, didn't seem like they should be the entire focus of the course. The instructor felt he couldn't, in good conscience, teach an environmentally themed class and ignore what officials were already speculating could become one of the worst ecological disasters in US history. The instructor adjusted the syllabus at the last minute, adding a new requirement asking the students to "discuss ways in which [they] can help aid, even in some small way, the efforts to ameliorate the effects of the disaster." This last-minute change made a significant difference in the education of the students.

Before describing the service-learning effort, it's worth emphasizing that the service learning was only one aspect of the five-week class, and the students were busy completing other assignments too. They were simultaneously reading essays and stories from the anthology *Listening to Earth* edited by Hallowell and Levy (2004), which included work by John Muir, Barry Lopez, Henry David Thoreau, Sarah Orne Jewett, Rachel Carson, Terry Tempest Williams, Edward Abbey, and Edward O. Wilson. The anthology also contains an essay by Darcy Frey called "How Green is BP?" which was a fortunate coincidence since the instructor had completed the textbook order long before the oil spill began. The writing assignments for the course consisted of asking the students to complete nature journal entries and analytical papers about the texts. But while the texts gave students a chance to read and write about a variety of environmental literary arguments, the service-learning project gave them a chance to see firsthand the worldly relevance of writing about environmental issues. The vast majority of the literary texts did not directly relate to BP or oil spills; however, the environmental disaster exemplified the *idea* of how, as the syllabus stated, the "environment directly affects human lives and, vice versa, how humans affect the environment" in a way that the readings couldn't do by themselves.

The first step in the service-learning component was in helping the students become educated about the environmental disaster and decide what they could do to help. As online students, they were somewhat limited in what they could attempt. They discussed raising money to buy soap for the cleanup crews; they discussed a letter-writing campaign to politicians. Ultimately, they discovered that the National Wildlife Federation had made it easy for people to donate money specifically to animals affected by the spill. By sending a text to a donation number, $10 would be automatically withdrawn from a person's account, with the vast majority of it going directly to the efforts related to the spill.

Once they had a rough idea, the instructor provided some structure for the students by asking them to complete a few specific activities. First, to promote multimodal literacy in the class, the instructor asked each student to design a brochure or flyer that would inform readers about the easy way to help. Once the flyers were completed, the students were asked to use them to aid in their quest to seek donations. The instructor explained that the students could ask businesses in their areas if they could display them. They were also free to use the flyers to hand out to people whom they would ask for donations. The instructor discouraged the students from going door to door (out of concern for their safety) but allowed them to visit public places and try to recruit donations that way.

The students ran into several challenges as they tried to obtain pledges for donations. To begin with, this was a summer course, so the compressed schedule limited the time they could work on the project. Also, the students lived in small towns where there weren't that many busy public places to seek out donors. They weren't living in a metropolitan area where they could go to a popular park or shopping mall, or even the campus of a busy university. Also, they were in rural communities sometimes trying to speak to conservative residents who objected vehemently to the idea of giving money for such a cause.

In the end, the students raised at least $320. We say "at least" because the reality is there is no way to know. The students passed out and hung up flyers, and therefore they could not know precisely how many people they might have influenced to make a donation. What we know is that *at least* thirty-two people pledged to the class that they would contribute $10 via the text-messaging service. Initially, the instructor could tell the students were disappointed with what they had accomplished. But the instructor saw that it had, in fact, been successful.

The goal had never been to make a *major* impact on what was happening in the Gulf of Mexico; rather, it was to have some small measure of impact and, at the same time, help the students take part in a project where they could, as Mitchell states, "see themselves as agents of social change" (2008, p. 51). In their final reflection essays, the students articulately expressed how much they had gained from the experience: knowledge of the disaster, personal growth from having worked on the project, and pride from having contributed to the good of society—in addition, of course, to concepts related to literature, writing, rhetoric, and communication. Several students expressed surprise at how difficult it was to obtain pledges, even though the expense was only $10. They found the experience eye opening, not only to learn about the extent of the disaster but also to realize how little some people cared. While some of their comments expressed frustration, they did not express cynicism. Several said that they would be more aware of issues and circumstances like the Gulf oil spill and try to contribute positively when such environmental problems arise in the future. At the same time, the students' efforts regarding the service-learning project helped put their assigned readings into a new light. The specific subject matter was different, but the general themes of environmental stewardship were the same. Students often found connections between their own actions and those of the authors in the texts. They could more successfully put themselves in other people's shoes, thinking em-

pathetically about the writers' stories and claims because they were going through something at least somewhat related.

In summary, as a result of the class, we believe the students learned the course's goals about literature, but the experience also helped them develop a critical consciousness. The students chose to raise money, but such projects could take multiple forms: advocacy, raising awareness, writing letters, etc. While the instructor provided some guidance for their discussions, the process of determining the project was pedagogically democratic. Like the Women and Literature class project, this undertaking illustrates that the teacher doesn't necessarily need to have a clear map of what the project will look like ahead of time. Further, it shows that students can be online and don't have to be based in the same community, and that the project doesn't inherently have to be a local community problem. If an unexpected natural or *un*natural disaster is in the forefront of the country's mind, teachers can make last-minute changes—or even mid-semester changes—to challenge students to help. Even if the help they provide is seemingly insignificant—like $320 for a multibillion-dollar problem—there is more gained than can be quantified.

Conclusion—Service Learning in Education

The path to hopeful transformation may be a bumpy road for both educators and students alike. hooks (1984) claims that students often have alternate views they bring into the classroom and may be reluctant to let go of these paradigms. Just as students can show hesitancy when letting go of their paradigms, teachers may also experience uncertainty when incorporating service-learning projects into the curriculum. It may seem difficult to find service projects that not only supplement the curriculum, but also enhance it as well. While incorporating service-learning projects into a course is certainly not an easy task, the results of service learning show great promise.

In reading about these examples, we hope that readers see two instances of using service learning that they could consider models to take ideas from to fit their own needs. More importantly, we hope these examples are illustrative of the potential for service learning to infuse and invigorate literature and other humanities classes. Outside of English studies, instructors should consider the possibilities of service-learning projects, even when the field of study might not seem like an obvious fit for social action. These two experiences are far from exhaustive examples. Rather, they give insight into the richer, broader possibilities regarding service learning.

We do not advocate incorporating service learning into courses simply for the sake of doing it. If the project does not make sense in the context of the curriculum, or if the project will merely seem like busywork rather than actually engage the students—with the content of the course as well as the mission of the project—then it seems ill advised to move forward. However, what we hope our examples show is that instructors can find ways to make such projects engaging to students *and* relevant to the material being taught in the course. Such projects can complement the subject matter and enrich the courses instead of simply being another requirement that students view as an obligatory hurdle to get through. This article is an effort to contribute to the ongoing conversations about service

learning generally and in literature courses specifically. Because of the danger, as Grobman (2005) points out, for such projects to "undermine literary studies rather than imbue it" (p. 129) with cultural significance, we believe it's important to continue these discussions.

Both of these experiences provide examples of writing *about* the community, as Deans has described it (2000). We encourage teacher-scholars to consider other ways in which writing-*about*-community projects could be incorporated into their courses. Additionally, we encourage readers to consider writing-*for*-community and writing-*with*-community projects. How might teachers invigorate their classes with such projects? These are questions that we encourage others to continue to explore.

What we hope we've shown is that service learning can have a home in literature courses as a way to connect the content of the course to a real-world social (or environmental) issue. Moreover, service-learning can have a home in fields of study where it might not initially seem to belong. And even when there are other obstacles—holding the class online or teaching in a rural community—instructors can find ways around these challenges. If a goal of education is, as Giroux (2011) claims, to encourage "students to take risks, act on their sense of social responsibility, and engage in the world as an object of both critical analysis and hopeful transformation" (p. 14), then instructors should continue to investigate ways in which service learning can invigorate their on-line and face-to-face classrooms.

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