

Ideas in Practice: Service Learning to Motivate College Writers

By Rachelle Furness and Eric J. Paulson

ABSTRACT: *In this article, the authors describe an approach for embedding service learning into developmental reading and writing curricula to assist new college students in overcoming reluctance to write. The authors first present an overview of literature pertaining to the interrelated nature of motivation, reflection, and opportunities for student choice as the foundation for a service-learning approach. Copious examples from a first-year in college developmental, integrated reading and writing course are then used to illustrate how service learning can provide reluctant writers with highly motivating instructional activities that support their development as college writers.*

We open this Ideas in Practice article with a quotation from a first-generation, Latina college student enrolled in a developmental reading and writing course. Her reflection on her service-learning experience of tutoring high school Latinx students in her hometown indicates students can find motivation through helping others.

The experience I got from tutoring... reminded me of everything I worked for to get to where I am at. It gave me a reason to not give up, even when it gets hard because I promised to go back during Christmas break and talk to them some more. I cannot get this type of motivation from anywhere else.

In this article, we focus on service learning and motivation, specifically in terms of supporting struggling writers.

Motivation is especially important for students who, through negative past experiences with writing, may have developed performance-avoidance orientations to writing (Dweck & Legget, 1988). For postsecondary writing instructors, the question is not whether motivation is important but rather how to build motivation into classroom experiences. Indeed, several models and theories of learning have a common link: the assertion that motivation is a critical factor in overcoming writing reluctance (Efklides, 2011, Keen & Hall, 2009; Pajares, 2003; Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007; Phillips, Bolduc, & Gallo, 2013; Street, 2005; Zimmerman, 2012). Motivation underpins student self-efficacy, which is students' perceived level of confidence related to their ability to act (Bandura, 1977). Literacy literature

strongly associates students' reluctance to write with low writing self-efficacy (Efklides, 2011; Keen & Hall, 2009; Pajares, 2003; Pajares et al., 2007; Phillips et al., 2013; Street, 2005; Zimmerman, 2012).

In this article, we provide a review of relevant literature on service learning as an effective method to increase student motivation to write. We then offer how-to insights on implementing service learning in the classroom through a description of a first-year in college, developmental integrated reading and writing (IRW) course.

What is Service Learning?

Although service-learning has a variety of definitions (Baca, 2012; Eyster & Giles, 1999), a traditional understanding is one in which a formal, institutionally organized approach is designed as an internship-type experience to master course content while building a sense of community responsibility (Baca, 2012). Although an institutional-level service-learning experience has exceptional value, this should not preclude a wide array of small-scale, classroom-level projects. In a broader sense, Eyster and Giles (1999) defined service learning as a balance between service to the community and academic learning. The authors emphasize that service learning takes place as individuals find a connection with others while applying knowledge in a useful context.

Several studies have provided evidence of how service learning can be effective in helping students make connections and apply knowledge to increase motivation to write. Keen and Hall (2009) noted that students have a difficult time dialoguing with others who may be different from them and correlated this gap in understanding to writing barriers. Service-learning components helped students build positive and meaningful interactions among diverse peers, which facilitated communication inside and beyond the classroom. In another example, Wright, Calabrese, and Henry (2009) asserted that service learning builds a more global awareness in students and allows for transfer of learning to a variety of circumstances. Having limited prior knowledge and experience of a wide variety of topics and issues has presented barriers to learning. Wright et al. also indicated that reflective components of service-learning writing curriculum (such as student self-evaluation activities for reading strategies, writing conference reflections, and portfolio reflections)

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build critical thinking skills and support students in their ongoing creation and refining of writing schema. Finally, Butler, and Christofili (2014) found that open-ended, connected, problem-based learning assignments generated buy in from students placed in developmental education coursework. In connection with preapproved service organization options, students collaborated to research, analyze, and create story logs. Their community story project supported development of individual writing competencies across disciplines and increased metacognitive awareness of the relevance of authentic community problem solving to address social-justice issues. As noted in the three studies referenced previously, service-learning components in writing curriculum can support students in demonstrating higher levels of motivation, self-efficacy, and academic achievement (Butler & Christofili, 2014; Keen & Hall, 2009; Wright et al., 2009). By intentionally designing instruction with embedded service-learning components, instructors can provide opportunities to increase motivation and assist students in overcoming reluctance to write. In the next section, we describe foundational principles of a service-learning approach embedded in writing curriculum.

Principles of Service-Learning Writing Curriculum

The potential effectiveness of using service learning to build motivation in writing curriculum has been noted in recent community engagement scholarship. In introducing a volume focused on service learning in writing studies, Baca (2012) wrote, "Service-learning as a pedagogy can be practiced when faculty have a strong sense of community, are visionaries, and go beyond the expected" (p. xii). That is, service learning can support instruction that seeks to address issues of educational inequities related to development of writing skills in the learning community. To enact such pedagogy, instructors often plan for two main curricular elements: student choice and opportunity for reflection.

Student Choice

Research supports curriculum design for student choice and student voice to make the content more relevant for the learner and increase the likelihood that students will be vested in the learning and motivated to persist (Butler & Christofili, 2014; Street, 2005). Choice and voice support learners to rebuild some sense of agency in the writing process across disciplines. As they build agency in short-term learning activities, students realize successive gains to establish long-term positive writing identities (Butler & Christofili, 2014).

By assisting students to have more authority over their writing, Street (2005) has found that they can be empowered to break through motivational barriers by allowing them to write about a topic of

their choosing. According to a reluctant writer in the study, "That's cool, I'd rather write about *something* than drone on about *nothing*" (p. 837). From a student standpoint, the topic she or he chooses may have more relevance than a mandated topic.

Additionally, trust and a sense of community become possible when the students are given opportunities to share their ideas (Street, 2005). Service-learning components expand the community building properties of the classroom and strengthen vested interest in a topic. A sense of trust and community has great potential to support learners as they continue to develop their identity as a successful academic writer.

Opportunities for Reflection

In addition to allowing students more choice in their learning, principles of service learning as components of curriculum should also include opportunities for reflection. According to Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey (2012), students enter college

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with a lack of adequate prior knowledge specifically in conceptions of writing models. The authors claimed that opportunities to develop metacognitive awareness of their writing through reflective writing activities are critical to building writing efficacy. Similarly, Keen and Hall (2009) used the term *academic service learning* (service learning connected to academic tasks) and asserted that students who had opportunities to participate in reflective dialogue were more likely to demonstrate academic growth. Students learned to dialogue across "boundaries of perceived difference" (Keen & Hall, p. 76) and were nudged toward more mature epistemological beliefs, or personal theories, about what they know and how they know it. And, in tandem with developing more mature epistemological beliefs related to the viewpoints of others, Mastrangelo and Tischio (2005) pointed out that, rather than keeping learning "at arm's length," instructors should strive to design the learning environment to be very personal for students (p. 32). Reflection activities in the sequence of learning events create opportunities for students to make learning very personal while increasing their ability to embrace multiple points of view and write with a greater sense of competence.

Notably, in supporting students to gain greater competence to communicate ideas, Eyler and Giles (1999) observed that the quality and amount of

reflection was a "modest but significant predictor of almost all of the outcomes we examined" (p. 173). Although some students reported that writing a reflection in the form of journal writing was not the most engaging part of the service-learning experience, it helped them to clarify their understandings and remember their learning (Eyler & Giles). In the same vein, throughout a semester-long writing course, Webb (2012) designed a sequence of student inquiry beginning with group discussions and individual written responses to service-learning literature that informed reflective writing assignments, culminating in a debate over the pros and cons of using service learning in the writing classroom. The majority of the students self-reported that they scored an "A" on their final debate as a result of accomplishing expected guidelines. Such a positive summative reflective experience supports students in building a sense of agency in their learning and in developing a critical lens with which to approach authentic community issues.

Summary: Service-Learning Principles

As instructors embed service-learning components in curriculum, student choice and opportunities for reflection can be employed to increase student motivation. Student choice in selecting a project of personal interest increases motivation (Shawer, Gilmore, & Banks-Joseph, 2008). Student involvement with others in the community helps activate empathy and engage learner buy in (Butler & Christofili, 2014; Ganss & Baker, 2014). Reflective writing supports development of metacognition and "sustained dialogues across perceived areas of difference" (Keen & Hall, 2009, p. 76). In turn, metacognition drives self-directed learning to build self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 2012). Ultimately, a focus on service learning can be effective in transforming the student experience to avoid contributing to educational marginalization; the sustained learning benefits that result can empower the student to act as a change agent for others. In the next section, we describe those principles embedded in a developmental reading and writing course, taught by the first author.

An Illustration: Service Learning in A Developmental Reading and Writing Course

According to Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986), instructional approaches should be student-centered to mitigate the "charged situation of a classroom in which novices are asked to perform as experts" (Preface). Because students placed in developmental education coursework are working toward mastering college reading and writing expectations, the instructor employed service learning to address student needs for meaningful and substantial

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learning experiences beyond the classroom. In the first author's developmental integrated reading and writing (IRW) course, student-centered learning took the form of student choice and opportunities for reflection related to service-learning activities to scaffold development of college-level writing skills.

Description of IRW Course

The developmental reading and writing course in which I, as instructor, embedded service learning was taught at a large Hispanic Serving Institution. Students placed into the course by scoring below the cutoff determined by the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) Assessment, which tests college readiness in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. To address assessed college preparation gaps, the IRW course is designed to scaffold students' reading and writing development as they move toward taking college-level coursework. The 15-week syllabus included an integration of student-selected, college-level fiction and nonfiction reading activities within cycles of narrative, expository, and persuasive writing. The embedded service-learning aspect incorporated critical reading and reflective and recursive writing related to a student-chosen social-justice issue. The 17 students enrolled in the courses represented diverse populations (African-American = 2, Asian = 1, Hispanic = 11, and White = 3). The course was designed and taught from a social constructivist approach.

Student Choice in IRW Curriculum

In this course, student choice was embedded in student selection of reading text, topic, and service-learning activity. To increase the likelihood of successful implementation of service-learning curriculum, the semester was sequenced to allow students opportunities to build on three successive reading and writing cycles while incorporating a self-selected outside service-learning event.

In the first reading/writing cycle, students selected from five core readings based on their discipline interests. They set up their own schedule for completing reading and annotating assignments within course due dates which allowed a shared responsibility between the instructor and students to design a class reading schedule. Students worked collaboratively within reading groups on the online course learning management system to support each other in developing rich understandings of social-justice issues in the readings. Time was also allotted for student exploration of social-justice topics from their core readings to write a narrative piece. Foundational instructional activities for the course were designed to scaffold prior knowledge in low-impact grading situations (e.g., online annotations of significant passages and written online group discussions of those passages) to build student

confidence and reduce anxiety as they conducted their research and completed writing assignments.

After building confidence from student-selected reading activities, students identified personally relevant social-justice issues in core readings to address in their reading/writing cycles. Additionally, the issues selected tied to their choice of college major to help build their discipline knowledge. For example, one student chose to read *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, by Rebecca Skloot (2010), and identified social injustices related to the limitation of services available to marginalized communities in institutional settings. His service-learning project involved volunteering to assist other Spanish-speaking students in his dorm with interpreting to ensure they were able to access services. His core reading and service-learning experience supported a richly developed and empathetic narrative writing piece.

During the second reading/writing cycle, the narrative writing piece was nested in an expository

The instructor collaborated with a librarian to facilitate guided database searches during class time.

piece to intentionally offer students a way to build skills in a smooth continuum. In this cycle, students completed a self-selected service-learning activity. Allowing for a window of dates (any time before Week 8 of the semester) instead of assigning specific due dates for the completion of a service-learning activity gave students flexibility in scheduling. The second writing cycle focused on development of an informed argument using evidence from their core reading and additional self-selected outside credible sources. To provide a less stressful environment for selecting sources, the instructor collaborated with a librarian to facilitate guided database searches during class time. Students were also scaffolded in developing an informed argument by participating in a Socratic seminar to gain audience perspective of their chosen evidence to support their respective topics. For the service-learning component of the course, students chose an experience which they felt would fit their scheduling and interest needs. They were encouraged to attend a university-sponsored volunteer event held at the beginning of the semester to explore opportunities in the community. They also had support through their first-year experience course website, which listed multiple local organizations offering various services to the community. Students were encouraged to work with other students, but they chose to work as individuals.

Finally, in the third reading/writing cycle, some opportunity for student choice was built into the final project. Building on their increasingly self-directed learning, students wrote a problem/solution paper. The paper detailed the social-justice issue they had identified and proposed a solution based on a synthesis of their collaborative and individual research from cycles one and two, including their service-learning experiences. The problem/solution paper served as a template for creating a multimodal learning outcome, a condensed PechaKucha (a PowerPoint presentation composed of 20 images advancing automatically every 20 seconds and usually accompanied by text or audio). Although a PechaKucha presentation was modeled, students could suggest a comparable alternative. Two students took the initiative to request and successfully complete alternative assignments using MovieMaker software.

In contrast to those who assert that embedding service learning in the curriculum poses many logistic challenges, the instructor found that allowing for student choice in course design solved many ongoing instructional issues such as assignment completion and engagement with the content. Moreover, Shower et al., (2008) found that student choice in curriculum approaches had a positive impact on students' affective changes. In many ways, student choice paved the way for a very smooth and trouble-free facilitation of learning and supported students in gaining metacognitive skills.

Connecting through Student Choice

Similar to the student responses in the Street (2005) article, students in this course expressed their satisfaction with being able to have some choice in the course. They had a choice in the following areas: service-learning project, core reading text, pace of reading, and social-justice topic.

The choice of service-learning project created an opportunity for students to match their interests and abilities with a need to help. The students were encouraged to attend a university-wide volunteer fair for ideas about the types of service-learning projects available in the community. Additionally, the teacher offered ideas in class, was available during office hours, and communicated via email to assist students in identifying an appropriate service-learning activity. Students understood the personal benefits of community involvement but could also appreciate the benefit to others. As one student noted:

I chose to help with this pumpkin patch because I enjoy seeing smiles on little kids faces and all of the money my certain group made we decided to donate it to breast cancer awareness. Choosing to participate in this volunteer work not only allowed me to have a good look on my resume but it also got me the chance to help the city...and meet new people.

By allowing students to be actively involved in identifying a personally meaningful service-learning activity, their motivation to participate and subsequent learning was enhanced.

During the first week of the course, students considered an instructor recommended list of core reading texts and selected one. Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986) advocated for student choice, “so they can move from the margins of the university to establish a place for themselves inside” (p. 41). One student reflected:

Out of the five reading texts you gave us to choose, I picked [text] because the book referred to my major in the sense that medical research was being presented... The benefits of choosing what to read is being able to finish any assignment when asked and not having to struggle to finish because of how engaged one is with the reading.

Having a choice of reading text allowed students to find relevant connections to their career aspirations and eliminated some of the reluctance to complete academic tasks.

In addition to selecting their core reading, students made individual decisions about reading timelines and selected a topic of focus from the reading to inform their writing assignments. Students set their own pace for completing reading assignments. At first some students were a bit uneasy about monitoring their own reading pace and ended up following one of the suggested schedules. Others appreciated setting their own reading pace for discussion in online forums. Although many of the students admitted that they got behind on reading at times, they consciously developed strategies to get caught up. They discussed how the flexibility on the amount of reading helped them plan around other school and work obligations.

In tandem with their self-directed reading pace, students identified an issue in the reading to serve as the focus of their research and writing. Being in control of the writing subject gave reluctant students a chance to see themselves as agents of change. One particularly reluctant writer at the beginning of the semester reflected how choice made a difference in approaching the writing process:

I figured that being able to talk about an issue I chose, rather than one being appointed to me, gave me more [insight] to the topic; because I was so concerned about that specific social-justice issue, I was able to write more and go into depth.

In short, students made meaningful connections because they personally directed the learning through a series of choices.

Opportunities for Reflection in IRW Curriculum

Beginning from the first day of class with a viewing of Ngozi Adichie’s TEDTalk from 2009, “The Danger of a Single Story,” the students reflected on how their skills as communicators enabled them to contribute to a global academic conversation. This reflection thread, related to their development of expertise to convey multiple “stories” or perspectives, was consistently reiterated as students encountered writing tasks to validate their ideas and support their willingness to engage in communicating those ideas. The reflective nature of this iterative process supported the students to build metacognitive strategies for college-level learning.

In each reading/writing cycle, students were afforded a variety of ways to reflect on their skills development and consider ways to strengthen their learning approaches. At the basic level students utilized a reading strategy checklist to identify which

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approaches they had employed in their active reading. This activity served to establish understanding of their reading strategy baseline from which to mark progress over the semester. Another reading reflection opportunity was embedded in an online discussion format. Students selected significant passages to annotate and posted their work to a group discussion forum. Members of the reading group provided feedback in the form of clarifying questions, expanding information, providing alternative interpretations, or additional connected evidence. Based on their peer feedback and review of peer posts, students considered alternative reading and annotation strategies for future posts.

Reflection was embedded in the first writing assignment as an organizer. The students followed a basic organizational strategy adapted from Bernabei and Hall’s (2012) “the story of my thinking” text structure to track how their ideas about their selected social-justice issue formed over time. Consistent with Perry’s (2011) developmental scheme, in which students progress from positions of basic duality through complex commitments, students were able to discern how their ideas moved from simple to more complex stances to demonstrate college-level academic discourse. This organizer also mapped for students how their prior knowledge forms a basis of a stance and can reveal bias.

Moving from organization of ideas to communication of ideas, students identified positionality and decided how to situate their point of view in the larger academic conversation. Within the course structure, several vehicles provided support for building reflective writing skills to help students participate in academic discourse. They included structured peer writing conferences, guided instructor writing conferences, and consistent rubrics focused on five major developmental college writing categories: development of ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, and language conventions. Supported by the systematic building of reflective skills, students moved toward leading discussions about writing strengths and weaknesses in summative writing conferences.

Of central importance in the reflective process to increase motivation to learn was the chance to write about their service-learning experience. Students thoughtfully developed their reports of learning experiences which connected their personal, academic, and professional worlds. Completed in the 10th week of the semester, this reflective writing task informed the central focus of summative statements students wrote in their portfolios and often revealed transformative learning experiences. As a culminating reflective experience on the last day of class, students viewed the PechaKuchas and discussed how their skills in conveying many stories had developed over the semester. This final class discussion involved some tears and students congratulated each other on creating “worthwhile” and “important” messages.

Each of the opportunities to reflect was designed to build self-efficacy as students marked progress toward college-level literacy skills. They identified strengths and weaknesses in a supportive environment and utilized personally meaningful topics aligned with their discipline interests to drive their learning. They consistently built on prior knowledge tied to their social-justice thread and created increasingly more sophisticated communications. More importantly, they articulated awareness of their skills progression and how they could transfer those skills to other contexts.

Connecting through Opportunities for Reflection

In concert with student choice, student reflective pieces supported connections and demonstrated increasing levels of self-efficacy. Ultimately, students arrived at a level of confidence in their writing which helped them overcome barriers. Embedding a unique, individualized experience via service learning allowed the instructor to support these students in reflecting on their growth and articulating how that growth would transfer to future environments:

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I wrote a better paper because I cared about the topic. I think it is important to talk about these important issues in college because we finally have a voice and we actually notice things that are happening around us, and we're about to actually participate in this world as an adult.

This heightened awareness of agency as a full member of society (e.g., as an adult) helped students to build self-efficacy and increased the likelihood that they would be able to mitigate reluctance to writing tasks in future college courses.

Especially for language learners, positive and self-reflective experiences with writing can help build self-efficacy. Students used opportunities to write reflective papers to express their gains in literacy, interpersonal, and critical-thinking skills. In a service-learning reflection paper, one student reported, "With [service] learning, it can help me build my skills to support my college studies by asking for help when I need it." This particular student, for whom English is a second language, also expressed a confidence in helping others by conveying a successful service-learning experience, "[f]or example, with my neighbors when they need someone to translate something, I'm there for them and help them as much as I can." This student saw the opportunity for growth in his own skills through a focus on supporting the learning of others.

Discussion

In a purposeful research to practice design, the organization of three cycles of reading and writing with embedded student choice and opportunities to reflect supported a rigorous integrated reading and writing curriculum. Students in the course described in this article showed consistent effort to complete assignments to build college-level literacy. Time and again, these reluctant writers wrote more than the required word count to express their thoughts on issues for which they held passion to understand from multiple perspectives and solve. They seemed wholly vested in an authentic problem-solving process involving a service-learning experience and their successive writing attempts demonstrated a genuine desire to communicate in an academic register. Students' positive experiences with embedded service-learning curriculum components were evident in the learning products and the gains reported in reflective writing. Many students expressed appreciation in reflective pieces for having a say in their choice of topic and readings. One student made a direct link from his initial reluctance to a motivated writer in his final portfolio reflection:

Before I entered this class, I really did not think I should have been enrolled in this reading class just because I failed the test by one point. ...

doing all these activities...really helped me become a better active reader and college student... This class has changed my whole perspective on how I view things and I want to thank you so much for doing this.

Not only did the students show evidence of beginning to overcome reluctance, but they indicated transformative learning in that their viewpoints evolved from simple dualistic understandings (passing a test or not) to more mature perspectives (developing an identity as an active college learner; Perry, 2011). The students connected service learning to motivation and writing because the curriculum purposefully afforded opportunities for choice and reflection.

Conclusion

This article described service learning, its connection to motivation, and principles for use in the classroom. We then provided an extended example of service

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learning embedded in a developmental reading and writing course. What the instructor experienced when she employed service learning in her course was that service-learning components embedded in the curriculum facilitated critical connections between course content and real-world application, and student comments and feedback supported her observation. As a result, students demonstrated a heightened sense of motivation to write. Although some educational leaders acknowledge the benefits that service learning offers in creating transformative student experiences, others view the components as superfluous. For example, Mathieu (2014), who situates herself in a "privilege of access" teaching context at Boston College, has asserted that service learning does not fit into her first-year composition course, citing timing, planning, and course registration as constraints (p. 123). Although Mathieu has expressed that she would "not stand in the way of an instructor in my program creating a service-learning component for the course," she provides a rationale for not requiring her team to design for service learning (p. 124). Service-learning curriculum design is not without its challenges as are most curricular designs; however, it is possible to effectively mesh course content with outside learning experiences on a scale easily managed by

a single instructor. By designing for student choice and reflection to increase student motivation and self-efficacy, instructors may find that the satisfaction gained in student success at the end of the semester outweighs the planning efforts in the beginning.

For sustained, far-reaching change to occur, instructors will need leadership support. Instead of leaving individual instructors to struggle alone, institution-wide initiatives are needed to support pedagogical shifts. Educational leaders, policy makers, and instructors should continue to advocate for more effective approaches in helping students overcome reluctance related to critical reading and writing. Service learning seems promising for supporting reluctant reader/writers within a highly motivating instructional context.

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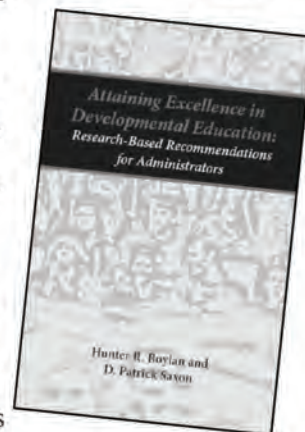
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