

In the Service of Writing and Race

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ABSTRACT: Service learning has been recognized as an effective pedagogical tool in the writing classroom. It has also served to help students develop an awareness of diversity and multicultural issues. In this article, I examine the benefits of service learning in a basic writing course designed for students of color attending a disproportionately white institution. Students in this course are accepted into the university through the Contractual Admissions Program (CAP), a program designed for students whose academic profile might otherwise impede their access to higher education. Through a close examination of student journal reflections and classroom exchanges, I argue that incorporating service learning in the curriculum helps students of color develop their reading and writing skills, recognize the

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For the past five years, I have taught basic writing to students who enter Bentley, a four-year business college, through the Contractual Admissions Program (CAP), a program designed for students whose academic profile might otherwise impede their access to higher education. The majority of students who enter Bentley through CAP are students of color from predominantly underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds. I set out with the same goals in CAP sections as I would in any section of writing: I want students to strengthen their writing skills by improving their reading skills and their critical thinking skills, and I hope that by developing these skills, students will develop self-confidence as both writers and members of an intellectual community. However, the material conditions of CAP students' lives may impede their progress toward achieving these goals. I have found that incorporating service learning, which integrates academic study with community service, into the curriculum has helped CAP students develop their reading and writing skills, recognize the contributions they make to the community and college, and understand how looking critically at issues of race, class, and gender can play a significant role in their intellectual growth. This article explains the benefits of incorporating service learning into a composition course and describes how I have integrated a service-learning component into the CAP writing course.

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Service Learning and the Writing Classroom

According to a number of studies, service learning has numerous and varied benefits. Service learning can provide students with a deeper understanding of course content (Bringle and Hatcher); help develop a sense of self-efficacy (Lee); enhance a student's understanding of the relationships among readings, course content, and site experiences (Dunlap *Reaching Out*); and establish in students a sense of civic responsibility (Eyler and Giles). Service learning can be effective in helping students develop a "deeper understanding" of an abstract concept such as critical thinking (Dunlap "Methods" 208). Indeed, service learning can help students both understand the concept and engage in the practice of critical thinking. According to Thomas Deans, a study done by Janet Eyler, Dwight E. Giles, Jr., and John Braxton suggests that students participating in service learning develop an ability to "*see problems as systemic*, and the ability to *see things from multiple perspectives*" (3 emphasis in original).

Such goals both complement and enhance the learning objectives in a composition course. Numerous publications have promoted service learning in composition studies. The American Association for Higher Education Series *Service-Learning in the Disciplines* dedicated an entire issue to Composition Studies (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters). *College Composition and Communication* has published a number of essays on service learning in the composition classroom (Himley; Welch; Green; Herzberg). Several expository writing anthologies focus on community service, providing writing exercises and readings that are designed to foster a sense of civic engagement (Ross and Thomas; Berndt and Muse). Deans outlines three types of service learning writing often assigned in the composition classroom: writing *about* the community, writing *with* the community, and writing *for* the community. Deans writes that the "pedagogical values now universally lauded in composition—active learning, student-centered learning, cooperative learning, life-long learning, cross-cultural understanding, critical thinking, authentic evaluation—are built into the very blood and bone of most community-based academic projects" (2). Because they are writing from lived experience, students often find their writing more meaningful (Bacon).

Despite its reported benefits, service learning is not without its pitfalls. Recent successful diversity initiatives on college campuses nationwide notwithstanding, colleges and universities remain disproportionately white. Thus, service-learning programs are often populated by white students who

are asked to go into poor urban areas to work with diverse communities, and there is a tendency for these students to view community service as an opportunity for self-fulfillment. Many middle-class white students walk away from their service-learning experience perceiving it as a kind of “giving back” to society; as a result, they feel good about it *and themselves*. Consequently, service learning has been viewed by some critics as “a dressed-up version of paternalistic charity or noblesse oblige that will inevitably reproduce the injustices it purports to address” (Deans 7).

Reflecting on the gap that exists between disproportionately white institutions of higher learning and the communities they serve through service-learning programs, Ann Green argues that service learning can work more effectively toward social change if faculty members encourage students and themselves to tell “more explicit stories about race and class” (277). Such an approach, she argues, leads to “more complex theorizing about the relationship between those who serve and those who are served” (277). Green advocates encouraging students to tell the “difficult stories” rather than the more familiar ones of how service learning “feels good,” which requires a willingness to “break our silences around race, class, and service” (277).

Another central criticism of service learning focuses on the failure of many programs to engage students in a critical examination of the systemic inequalities that pervade our culture. In “Community Service and Critical Teaching,” Bruce Herzberg explains how students typically fall short of structural analysis:

Why is homelessness a problem? Because, they answer, so many people are homeless. The economy is bad and these individuals lost their jobs. Why are so many people undereducated or illiterate? Because they didn’t study in school, just like so-and-so in my fifth-grade class and he dropped out. (309)

Herzberg writes: “If our students regard social problems as chiefly or only personal, then they will not search beyond the person for a systemic explanation” (309). Or put another way, as Robert Crooks argues, community service fails by working as “a kind of voluntary band-aiding of social problems that not only ignores the causes of problems but lets off the hook those responsible for the problems” (qtd. in Herzberg 309).

Thus, some of the goals of service learning—getting students to see from multiple perspectives and to become increasingly aware of cultural and

class boundaries—might not come to fruition if we fail to encourage students to think critically about their *own* identities. As Green sees it, breaking this silence around race, class, and service depends on white teachers interrogating and “unpacking white privilege” (277); for teachers who are middle class, it means “acknowledging differences of class, caste, and culture and not assuming that those who are working class or poor want middle class culture or aspire to middle class materialism” (277).

I am interested in discovering ways to help white students develop what Herzberg calls “a social imagination” (67). However, in this article, I want to shift the focus to the service-learning classroom populated by students of color who are required to go into spaces that are predominantly white. Students of color, who have experienced racism on a day-to-day basis (see, for example, chapter 3 of Joe R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes’ *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience*, entitled “Seeking a Good Education”), benefit from developing critical thinking skills that enable them to analyze race ideology¹ from both a personal and institutional perspective. Many students of color come to colleges and universities having been inappropriately tracked or labeled “remedial” in high school programs. As a result, their perception of their own writing skills and their confidence in those skills—or lack thereof—is influenced by these external assessments. David L. Wallace and Anissa Bell’s research reveals that students often internalize these attitudes about themselves as learners and thinkers. In a service-learning composition course (though it need not be limited to composition courses only), students of color may find themselves with opportunities to think critically about their lived experiences both inside and outside the classroom, systemic oppression, and dominant ideologies. For example, students of color may find themselves recognizing more subtle forms of racism embedded in the educational system that may have contributed to their sense of their academic performance. As a result of this reflection, some students begin to understand the complexity of racism and its influence on their assessment of themselves as poor writers.

I argue that this particular dynamic disrupts the “do-gooder” mentality of students who participate in service-learning courses. Some students of color in my course, who come from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds and are at an educational disadvantage, have described themselves as feeling marginalized in the classroom. Many begin to see themselves as necessary members of both an academic and a social community after working in service learning. By embedding service learning in a basic writing composition course, students have an opportunity to reflect on their service-

learning experiences through the practice of writing. Through a variety of written reflections, complemented by class discussion, these students begin to develop both their reading and writing skills, and they develop an ability to theorize issues of race, class, and gender. Furthermore, service-learning programs that require students to teach give them a chance to understand classroom dynamics from a different vantage point. Most importantly, students begin to recognize the role that education played in establishing or reinforcing some of their own and others' attitudes about them as learners and thinkers, about their race, and about their culture.

Bentley's Contractual Admissions Program (CAP)

Expository writing is a required two-semester program at Bentley. CAP writing instruction is offered through a lab component, which doubles the normal contact hours from two and a half hours to five hours each week. CAP students take the first semester writing course—EXP 101L—during a six-week intensive summer program, which they must complete successfully prior to matriculating in the fall. Thus, CAP students arrive at Bentley when very few students are in the residence halls or on campus. During the six-week program, those students of color accepted into the program are in the majority in terms of race since each summer only one or two white students are accepted into Bentley through CAP. All students entering the program share similar academic profiles, as well. Academic success has remained largely elusive to CAP students prior to their arrival on campus. The situation changes radically during the fall semester, when the remaining students return to campus. For example, sixty-nine percent of full-time undergraduates enrolled for the fall 2005 freshman class identified as white or non-Hispanic; two percent identified as black, four percent as Hispanic, eight percent as Asian/Pacific Islander, two percent as multiracial, five percent as nonresident, ten percent as race/ethnicity unknown. The median SAT score for all Bentley students was 1220. In September, CAP students suddenly find themselves in the minority in terms of race, class, and ethnicity, and at the bottom of the academic ranks.

I have taught the CAP summer composition course, EXP 101L, as well as the CAP fall semester course, EXP 201L, for five years, and thus I have had much experience watching these students transition from the intensive summer program to the traditional academic year, and my course objectives have evolved accordingly. While I continue to focus on reading comprehension, writing skills, and critical analysis, I see EXP 201L as an opportunity

for inviting CAP students into the intellectual conversation, helping them establish and recognize their place in the academic community, and making race, class, and gender ideology an explicit part of the course so that students can recognize these ideologies at work in their lives both inside and outside the classroom (Green).

When they enter the summer composition course, many CAP students think of themselves as poor writers. Few of them mention strengths when asked on the first day of class to describe their strengths and weaknesses as writers. Most of them describe themselves as needing significant help with their writing abilities. Note, for example, the way John,² a student originally from the Dominican Republic, answers the question: “Didn’t learn much from my high school on writing. Strengths—you’d have to point them out to me because I don’t think I have any. Weaknesses—a lot, so if you could help me improve my writing, I’ll be more than thankful.” He closes by describing himself as “very self-conscious.” Others list phrases such as “bad at grammar,” “not good with punctuation,” and “bad at organizing ideas.” Kim, who was born in Vietnam and came to the United States when she was a child, says she needs help with her English both in the “way she speaks and the way she writes.” Many students have difficulty seeing themselves as good students, and on those first days of the summer semester, very few are ready to embrace themselves as members of an intellectual community.

While struggling with their place in the classroom and larger college community, most of these students are also dealing with demands related to coming from working-class families. The summer program is designed so that students can return home on Fridays in order to work in part-time jobs. In one recent case, a successful student had to drop out of the program one week before its completion in order to return to her full-time job, which provided her family with its main source of income. Furthermore, many of these students are being raised by single parents or extended family guardians—aunts, cousins, and in one case, siblings. Thus, many students are also juggling the demands of family duties like babysitting or caretaking.

In any course, but especially in a basic writing course, I want students to learn how to read, how to write, but most importantly, how to think critically. CAP students’ writing abilities are affected by their weak reading comprehension skills. When students are asked to summarize a short reading assignment, their required annotations reveal the difficulty they have in identifying the main point of a passage or in understanding the structure of an author’s argument. Much of the summer semester focuses on improving students’ ability to tease out the meaning of a passage before asking them

to analyze those ideas.

In EXP 101L, the summer composition course, I use popular culture as a theme and semiotics as a vehicle for helping students develop both reading skills and critical thinking skills and have had success using Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon's *Signs of Life* toward this end. Given their familiarity with popular culture, students find themselves both comfortable with and knowledgeable about the topics and images we analyze. Students who participate in my summer course analyze the cultural values embedded in everything from sneaker ads and cereal boxes to newspaper op-ed pieces and scholarly essays. In doing so, I hope students become more adept at seeing and recognizing ideologies at work in their lives.

In the fall EXP 201L section, which includes the service-learning component, I ask these same students to apply this critical lens to ideologies of race, class, and gender inside and outside the classroom. In the past I had always relied on anthologies and students' personal accounts to generate these discussions. However, I have recently discovered that integrating a service-learning component into the course can be an even more powerful way to address these issues.

One Approach to Service Learning

In the fall of 2004, I received a Service-Learning Curriculum Development Grant offered through Bentley's Service-Learning Center (BSLC). Grant recipients work with the BSLC academic coordinator to find a service-learning program that complements the goals of the course. BSLC staff members help to coordinate the program and take care of student placements. An onsite student project manager oversees weekly activities. The particular service-learning program I use, "2+2=5: The Power of Teamwork," which was created by a Bentley undergraduate, introduces elementary school students to the importance of teamwork in helping them develop their interpersonal skills.

Weekly exercises in the "2+2=5" program focus on cooperation, leadership, communication, trust, and conflict resolution.³ Student facilitators engage the elementary school students in team-building activities. For example, in "the flying egg," students must work in small teams to design a protective device for an egg that will be dropped from a height of five feet. Each group is given the same materials with which to work. Student facilitators serve a number of roles during each activity. At the start of each class, they review the previous week's lesson and introduce the new topic.

During the activity, the facilitators, who have been assigned to one small group for the duration of the semester, work with the elementary students to help them solve the task. Finally, after each activity, student facilitators bring the class together in a large group and lead a reflection discussion.

After leading the elementary school students through each week's activities, CAP students post weekly reflections in an online journal as part of their coursework. The first time I taught the course, students posted comments on Blackboard, an online course management system. The second time I taught the course, students kept a blog. While the two electronic formats are somewhat similar, the Blackboard site gives only the instructor the ability to create discussion threads where students can post comments on a particular theme. On the course blog, students have the ability to create these threads in a more unstructured format. Posting journal reflections in this public forum promotes student-centered learning as students use the space to exchange ideas among themselves. For example, Nanda writes, "I posted a blog about how my group always finished the activity early and I did not know what to do with the remaining time. I had many people respond to my problem and give me ideas for a solution." A portion of each EXP 201L class meeting is set aside for discussions of students' on-site experiences, journal postings, and any related concerns. Students also periodically produce in-class freewrites that are used to generate class discussions or ideas for longer, more formal writing assignments.

Because of the nature of the service that students are asked to perform—teaching and facilitating discussion among elementary school children—both times I taught this course I focused on the theme of education in the United States. The literature on service learning suggests that best practices for effective integration of service learning into any course include "service that is connected to the curriculum" (Tannenbaum and Berrett 198). CAP students in EXP 201L reflect on their past experiences in elementary school and high school. They examine the service-learning elementary classroom space, and they examine their experiences on the Bentley campus.

Throughout the semester, students read a number of texts to help them begin to think about education in the context of race, class, and gender. Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, which focuses on the subject of education from the perspective of marginalized students, serves as the central text of the course. Many CAP students relate to the stories of the students Rose describes. The text also helps them begin to recognize "the abilities hidden by class and cultural barriers" (Rose xi). While CAP students retell their own stories with relative ease, I use readings on race ideology to help them begin

to theorize the complexity of their stories in the context of race, class, and gender. Again, Stuart Hall's piece "The Whites of Their Eyes" is quite useful in this context as well as excerpts from the video recording *Blue Eyed* based on Jane Elliott's experiment in discrimination with students in her third-grade class in Riceville, Iowa, in the late 1960s. I also use Margaret Metzger's piece "Playing School or Telling the Truth?" which helps students begin to recognize the role they play in the process of making meaning of a text and the production of knowledge in the classroom.

I also find it important for students to feel comfortable examining the cultural values operating *within* our composition classroom. Fan Shen's piece entitled "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as Key to Learning English Composition" has been quite useful toward this end.

As part of the written requirements of the course, students spend much of the semester working on a research essay that must address some aspect of education in the United States. While the final draft of the essay is due on the last day of classes, students begin work on the project by the second week of the semester. A first draft of the essay is usually due within the first four weeks. It is important to note that students are not required to write about their service-learning experience in these final essays. Don Kraemer has raised questions about the types of writing we assign in service-learning basic writing courses. He argues "writing-for projects do not serve our students well because rather than inquire into the complexity of making leadership collaborative, they advance the process of making student servitude seem inevitable" (93). In my class, the service-learning component provides another way of helping students begin to examine the cultural values embedded in the classroom and to experience the classroom from a new vantage point as teachers. Despite the fact that students are not required to write specifically about their service-learning experiences in their final papers, in most cases, the service-learning experiences and our discussions of race, class, and gender inform students' choices of topics and their analysis.

The majority of the CAP students spend time at an elementary school, which serves predominantly white students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. The second time I taught the course, three students chose to work at a local housing project whose children come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds. For two of those students, the choice to participate in the service-learning program at the housing project stemmed from scheduling conflicts. One student, however, after visiting both sites, found himself energized by the children at the housing project and liberated by the more informal structure

of the program. While students were teaching the same curriculum at both sites, the CAP students teaching at the housing project did not face the same academic demands imposed on those students working in the elementary classroom.

As a result of this open structure, the students participating in service learning at the housing project had more autonomy to make decisions at the site. Albert describes the satisfaction he felt in getting the children at the housing project to focus their energy on the “ $2+2=5$ ” activities and in helping them develop team-building skills. He writes, “These students at first were a case. They did not want to listen. At first [I] had to force them to want to participate in the activity.” But the real satisfaction came in his ability to teach others:

I was the coach for my team. . . . I pretty much took the role to lead them to victory without actually playing. This was very memorable because I really connected with the students. Telling them that they were very good, that is how you do it, build up there confidence and they just began to do a better job. The students found this very encouraging.

Albert’s approach in motivating the students, “telling them they were very good” (words many CAP students report rarely hearing in their own educational experiences), was a point CAP students often addressed in class discussions. These students drew from their own high school experiences—both positive and negative—to help them determine the best approach in teaching the younger children at each site.

Ways of Seeing

CAP students have spent their lives seeing from a variety of perspectives related to their gender, race, and socioeconomic status. As they begin college, they are often aware or just on the verge of recognizing a number of value systems operating in their lives. Most of their lives they have been synthesizing a variety of ideological influences as a matter of survival. For example, Latina students often describe having to navigate the tension between traditional cultural views of gender handed down to them by parents and older generations, and dominant U.S. cultural notions imposed by their peers and evident in mainstream media. As gendered subjects themselves, they describe having to negotiate constantly the border between the two

competing ideologies. While CAP students may not have the language to describe these tensions as “competing ideological forces,” they are eager to start articulating the differences.

These students recognize complex dynamics at work in the different classroom settings arising from issues like race and class. For them, this opportunity to reflect on issues such as racism can be an empowering part of a course. While the service CAP students provide focuses on teaching elementary students the components of teamwork, issues of race and racism often implicitly affect the service-learning activity. Because the service learning is embedded in a composition course, students are provided with a structure that allows them to develop the ability to recognize and analyze these issues in a more rigorous way through class discussions and written reflections. And students often return to the composition classroom eager to discuss their experiences as students of color in a variety of settings.

In students’ electronic postings and in class discussions, the topics students choose to address suggest that race matters, but students’ ability to tease out the complexity of the issues comes through reflection. Making the implicit issues of race, class, and gender more explicit is evidenced in an exchange that took place the first semester I incorporated service learning into my course. During one class discussion early in the semester, Mary, a student of color, said she had something “odd” to share with everyone. Mary was quite tentative as she broached the subject. In fact, after raising it, she tried to dismiss it. Other students in the class who seemed to know what Mary was alluding to encouraged her to continue. Together, Mary and those students familiar with her story recounted an incident that occurred during Mary’s first visit to the elementary school, when a fourth-grader pointed to her and said, “You look just like my family’s maid.” During that initial class discussion, Mary could articulate only feeling uncomfortable for being noticed and having attention called to her for this reason. She didn’t use language that suggested she was thinking of this comment in the context of race, class, or gender. All she could say at the time was that the incident reinforced a sense of herself as an outsider in the classroom space.

It took weeks for Mary to sort through the complexity of the brief exchange with the elementary student. As a class, we returned to it on several occasions. Stuart Hall’s piece on inferential racism⁴ helped students begin to tease out the complexity of this seemingly innocent statement. In class, students read from their freewriting exercises,⁵ which focused on their personal experiences with subtle forms of racism. Through these exercises, students tried to better understand Mary’s feelings of discomfort, as well as

their own, stemming from the elementary student's comment. They came to the conclusion as a group that this incident was racially motivated. As a result of the course readings and class discussions, Mary decided to meet with faculty and administrators at the elementary school. And later Mary reported to the class that faculty and administrators acknowledged the need to incorporate more explicit diversity education into the classroom. What started as a private matter became a public issue. Eventually, Mary's service-learning experience coupled with the critical inquiry she and her classmates engaged in regularly in the composition course around issues of race helped Mary turn a moment in which she felt uncomfortable into an empowering experience.

At this point in the semester, Mary had come to see herself not as an outsider but as a useful member of the community. After a visit to the elementary school, she wrote about being assigned to work with a new group of students. Mary felt somewhat tentative given that she had not had a chance to establish a relationship with these particular students. As she approached the group, a student she hadn't met during any previous visits to the site got excited to have her join the group and called her by name. Mary writes, "It was a student that I did not know by name. I felt like a celebrity. I felt like one of them. I never thought any of the other students would know my name let alone notice me. It was like I was there friend." Mary described feeling excited by the fact that some of the students looked to her as a leader. She became aware that everything she said or did might have an influence on them. For Mary, standing as a role model for others was an unfamiliar but completely invigorating position. Standing in that position in a classroom setting was entirely new to her.

By the end of the semester, Mary had developed a kind of confidence that led to her ability to critique her educational experience, her performance in the elementary school classroom, and our own expository writing classroom. At one point, Mary wrote that the service-learning program "makes the teaching and the learning precious." She felt that the best aspect of the course was that students were allowed to "teach themselves." She describes her approach in handling a situation in which the students lost their focus:

I continued with the activity with them and the group that was not so successful lost all focus and began to play. I wanted to switch back to the instructor persona but I decided to stay as a student. As a student I told them that someone could get hurt if WE [Mary's

emphasis] keep fooling around and then WE won't get to do the next activity. We behaved ourselves and continued the activity.

Mary goes on to comment on the way in which the children were willing to come together to accomplish their task. Where they had previously divided themselves along gender lines, Mary notes their willingness to work together. In the activity Mary describes, the students were asked to participate in a trust fall. In this activity, one student falls backwards into the arms of his or her classmates. The activity comes at the very end of the semester and is used as an assessment of how much the elementary students have gained from "2+2=5":

It was another trust fall but it only involved two people at a time. When we told them to pick a partner who they can trust, I was amazed to see that the girls didn't go with the girls and the guys with the guys. Everyone trusted everyone.

In the context of Mary's experience at the site, it's worth noting her conclusion to the reflection. She writes:

Writing this now just reminded me that at a young age I did trust easier and take more risk than I do now. Maybe that's the cycle of life. However it works, I'm glad that I have a place to go where I can be a kid again.

As a class, we discussed Mary's final meeting and the complexity of her reflection. While she was charged to teach the elementary students the importance of trust in the context of team-building, Mary found herself feeling somewhat tentative and guarded in her earlier experiences at the site. Through her willingness to engage in conversations with her peers in our composition classroom, she was able to move past the traumatic earlier exchange and commit herself to her role as educator. Her ability to move from student to teacher and back to student again offered her at least two vantage points from which she could make sense of her experiences. And writing offered her an opportunity to engage in inquiry that helped her examine the power dynamics in the classroom.

Mary was not the only student to work through her experiences in this manner. In the electronic postings, students reflected on a number of complex issues that each of us as teachers reflect on from day to day. In a

poignant passage, Albert describes the children at the housing project as kids who “have many things going for them but to this point just a few people know this.” Albert, a Hispanic student, spent much of the semester trying to help the children develop a positive image of themselves. He writes that he wants them to exceed “the expectation other people have for them.” Albert’s interests in helping marginalized individuals recognize their strengths carried over into his final writing project. There, he researched the immigrant experience on the Bentley campus. To do so, he interviewed students and service workers—cafeteria staff, custodial workers, and groundskeepers—in order to determine how people were perceived and treated at Bentley. Albert focused much of his analysis on the role of language. He writes, “Currently at the Bentley campus, the word for a person who is from any Spanish-speaking country is ‘Spanish.’ I am Puerto Rican and Colombian. I find it very offensive being called something other than what I am.” Being bilingual, Albert chose to work predominantly with Spanish-speaking immigrants. His writing combines his primary research, his experiences in service learning, and reflections on his own experience in bilingual classrooms. He writes, “I feel my [bilingual] class was not seen or equal to the other classes. The teacher and staff at the school were always thinking it was surprising that one of the ‘bilingual kids’ was doing well in the class. I was that boy that was in the bilingual class.”

Most students were eager to use the service-learning experience as a jumping-off point for returning to their own racialized experiences in elementary school and high school. They wanted to revisit those memories after having found themselves in the role of teacher at the service-learning site. The course allowed them to think critically about both their present and past experiences. Note, for example, Theresa’s comments in a Blackboard posting that focuses on her experiences in the classroom as a child. Here she starts off by describing one of their “2+2=5” activities at the elementary school:

We decided to divide the groups by counting off from 1 to 4. . . . the minute I saw my group I didn’t want to make any judgments because in my elementary career I was judged and I don’t want that to happen to others because of me.

For Theresa, teaching was actually a way to revisit past painful memories. In a freewrite she explains, “This is time for me to heal my wounds by seeing what it is like for a teacher teaching little children.” In her final essay for

the course, Theresa juxtaposed her experiences in elementary school with her analysis of the ideal teacher and classroom space. Much of her analysis depended on her service-learning experience and her ability to place herself in a new position, one which empowered her and offered a new lens for examining her memories and her own identity as a student. Theresa came to Bentley on a probationary status through CAP. She had little confidence in herself as a writer. By the end of the fall semester, she was setting out to write a paper that could serve as an instruction manual for teachers. In her final paper, she describes teachers who misjudged her and who labeled her because of her accent, her race, and her ethnicity. She describes the ways in which she internalized her teacher's comments, only recently deciding to confront the teacher and prove to her that she was nothing like the teacher determined her to be. She writes:

I have tasted all types of sizes and classifications such as “marginal,” “normal,” and “advanced.” From my experiences, I have the ability to build the perfect teacher. As I travel through my memories and unravel what went wrong and what was right, I will create the model educator.

Students often commented on learning that was taking place in multiple directions. Audrey writes:

With the 2+2=5 component of our class, we get to see what teaching is all about; this time we get to experience both the teaching and learning experience; we get to learn and we get to teach, and it is wonderful.

What I see as pulling back the curtain and demystifying the teaching process led students to take ownership of their classroom experience and their learning. It led to a greater awareness of issues stemming from race, ethnicity, and identity that may have subtly influenced their experiences. For example, by having to develop their own approach to teaching the weekly lessons, students had to spend time thinking like teachers and analyzing best classroom practices. As a result, students would come to the writing classroom and ask me questions about my approach with them. If, for instance, I asked students to participate in a small-group activity, occasionally they would recognize the similarity between my pedagogy in the college classroom and their approach at the elementary school. This aware-

ness made some students more willing to ask questions and more invested in the learning process itself.

It is important to note that students can be resistant to learning about race and racism. Tatum (“Talking about Race”) examines the sources of this resistance in classrooms populated by white students. She writes, “The introduction of these issues of oppression often generates powerful emotional responses in students that range from guilt and shame to anger and despair” (1). Based on her analyses of student journals, Tatum points out that students’ ability to acknowledge, comprehend, and analyze systems of oppression can be enhanced “when students are given the opportunity to explore race-related material in a classroom where both their affective and intellectual responses are acknowledged” (2).

This resistance about which Tatum (“Talking about Race”) theorizes became rather apparent in my classroom. I can recall one fall semester class session, in particular, when the heaviness in the room was suffocating. I assumed students were feeling burdened by assignments and midterm exams. When I questioned them, they recounted a number of racist incidents that had occurred on the Bentley campus. Audrey said she had never had to deal with these things in high school, but now she found herself having to defend her race, having to explain obvious things to people, and having to be a spokesperson for the Hispanic community. In a freewrite, she described feeling depressed and overwhelmed by the experiences. Audrey’s assessment of her Bentley experience is quite interesting. On one level, she was probably correct; she may have found herself dealing with more overtly racist comments in this new campus environment. On another level, though, Audrey’s frustration may have stemmed from the fact that her service-learning experience and her experience in the course made her see and read these racist incidents more frequently and more clearly. At the beginning of the semester, she really resisted this ability to see. She and Theresa would often argue over whether or not an incident was motivated by racism. Audrey didn’t want things to be a matter of race or ethnicity. In the context of white racial identity development, Tatum (“Why Are All the Black Kids”) writes, “But it is difficult to stop noticing something once it has been pointed out. The conflict between noticing and not noticing generates internal tension, and there is a great desire to relieve it” (101). Audrey, as a student of color, experienced that same type of tension and desire for relief.

By the end of the semester, though, she found herself recognizing and confronting these incidents. In fact, she and Theresa, who were in the same history class together, would ask CAP students in the composition course to

help them determine if a particular professor's comments were racist. Audrey got to the point where her interest shifted to the ways in which these ideas developed in people—ideas that were of no use in any classroom space. In one posting, she writes:

In the [___] school, we get to see the way children develop, how they develop stereotypes, how they become the “typical” football players, the cheerleaders, and the “bad” kids. And we get to see how, even in fourth grade, these kids are already adapting to a way of thinking.

For others, evidence of this learning and newfound confidence appeared in their final research essays. For example, Mary first proposed to examine the value of the SATs in assessing a student's ability to succeed in college. However, as the semester progressed and as Mary developed a greater ability to theorize issues of race and gender, the focus of her essay changed. By the middle of the semester, Mary was analyzing cultural values embedded in the test questions and the ways in which the SATs, as designed, might favor white students. In her final essay, she writes, “The SAT has been and still is an unfair . . . test that affects the chances of females, minorities, and low-income students of receiving higher test scores and entering good colleges.” In her essay, she examines the history of the test, the biases of the questions, and the effects of the system on students.

In addition, while her service-learning experiences and fellow students' written reflections helped her and her classmates develop a greater awareness of issues of race, class, and gender, Mary's experience in the service-learning program informed her research on larger educational issues, as well. She writes in the conclusion to her final essay:

From doing the service-learning program, I saw that at a young age, students do not academically perform at their best when they are timed. They panic and cannot focus because they are trying to get as much done as possible, rather than clearly thinking the problems through.

Theresa, as mentioned earlier, wrote a manual for teachers, with a focus on the ways in which stereotyping of any kind leads to internalized attitudes within the students themselves. She describes the effects of being labeled by teachers and writes, “and then there is the label that you give yourself

once you have been labeled by the teacher.” Theresa uses her memories of being mistreated and misidentified to provide her readers (whom she assumes to be teachers) with some guidelines: “As an objective person, one must look from all angles and not make judgments. The education system might appear to be proper and clean. But things are not always what they seem.” While Theresa does not explicitly refer to the skills we try to teach students in composition classrooms, her above comments seem to demonstrate critical thinking.

Finally, Angela, a Hispanic student who struggled much of the semester with her writing, used her final essay as a place to pose the question “Does the skin color of a person determine their success?” She examined the factors contributing to the low number of students of color enrolled in college. Her supporting evidence came from reflections on her high school experience and her participation in CAP. She writes, “My mother and father are working class parents with a low-income salary and like any other parents hope for me to receive my college education so that I won’t end up like them.” For Angela, the relationship between race and class became hard to ignore: “Many minorities cannot afford college tuition and are therefore incapable of attending college even though they may meet all the criteria for acceptance through the admissions process.” Angela’s essay remained somewhat disorganized even in its final draft. However, she went from being reluctant to post her comments in the public electronic forum at the start of the semester to being eager to present her research to the class at the end of the semester. Exhibiting ownership of her ideas and finding the voice to express those ideas seems essential for any student trying to achieve success in a writing course and in college.

Reframing One’s Thinking

Service learning gave CAP students a chance to understand and critique their educational experiences. Alternating between the role of student and the role of teacher or mentor, the students came at the issues raised in class from multiple vantage points. By doing so, students whose sense of themselves *as students* had been shaped, in part, by their elementary and high school experiences, began to recognize their potential to rewrite misleading and often inaccurate assessments of themselves.

Notice, for example, the way in which Albert reflected on his own approach as an instructor working to encourage a student whom he saw as having great potential but little self-confidence. He writes, “Every week I

found myself going to him and asking him how he was doing and not letting him get down.” Albert asked the student why he wasn’t taking credit for exceptional work he had done. According to Albert, “He responded that nobody thinks I can do it.” In his reflection, Albert recalls being labeled and stereotyped in school. He describes advising the elementary student to “listen to all of the positive comments people tell him” and to “turn all of the negative comments [into] motivators.”

In CAP students’ written analyses, they moved from past experiences in high school to present experiences in both the elementary school classroom and their Bentley classrooms. Ultimately, having the freedom and opportunity to critique the education system itself, students developed confidence in themselves as writers and thinkers. For example, Peter, a Hispanic student, in an analysis of Mike Rose’s views on students’ learning processes, combines his experiences in service learning with his reflections on his high school experience. Only after having been in the teacher role himself working with elementary students did he fully understand his AP calculus teacher’s approach. He writes:

He taught us like no other teacher I ever had. He would encourage us to be conceptual learners. He would always want us to understand mathematical concepts as opposed to just knowing how to do things. At first I didn’t understand him, but now I feel like [I] understand the importance of the idea.

And Albert writes:

The Service learning part of this class has been so great because it gives a twist to the meaning of Critical thinking which is what we the students of Expository Writing 201L are supposed to be learning and using outside of the class.

He describes service-learning sites as “places where [he] could use all we were learning in class.” He describes the elementary classroom as a place where students could develop their “ability to communicate” and to “problem solve.”

For students who have been perceived as weak writers and thinkers and, in many cases, have internalized these perceptions, the service-learning component allowed them to occupy a new and empowering position. One student writes that one of the elementary school teachers, after observing

the CAP students work with the children in her class, had learned from the experience: “she is thinking about changing her way of teaching a little bit to somewhat continue what we are doing now. . . . I found that to be remarkably incredible.”

Many students of color come to the college composition classroom having experienced racism and other systems of oppression. Participation in service-learning, combined with opportunities to reflect both in writing and in class discussion, can provide students a means to critique those systems; they move from awareness to critical consciousness. Moreover, many students of color in my service-learning course, in their role as teachers, developed not only a new vantage point for understanding positions of privilege in the education system and the role they have occupied within educational settings, but also a new appreciation of their own untapped potential. However, many students realized that making visible these structures of inequality is only the first step toward dismantling them. Most of the students in my basic writing course will find themselves the only person of color in many of the other courses they take while at Bentley. One of the aims of this service-learning experience is to provide some new techniques through which students can address their feelings of discomfort—as Mary’s experience demonstrates. In the best case scenario, students will feel empowered and able to address overtly the subtle racial dynamics in the classroom. Such empowerment should be the goal not only of service learning but of education in general.

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Notes

1. I rely on Stuart Hall’s often anthologized “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media” for an accessible explanation of the concept of race ideology that students can penetrate.
2. The names of students have been replaced with pseudonyms, and all students have granted permission to use their writing.

3. Scott Morency, the creator of “2+2=5,” has created a student handbook that outlines the program’s mission and the weekly activities. Copies of the handbook are available through Bentley’s Service-Learning Center <<http://ecampus.bentley.edu/dept/bslc/>>.
4. The first semester I taught the course, we abandoned the course anthology only three weeks into the semester because the readings did little to foster our thinking around the issues students were bringing back to class from their service-learning experience. The Hall piece, which is something I often use in expository writing, became much more poignant for the students in the context of Mary’s experience.
5. Students are not required to submit their freewrites to me at any point in the semester. Thus, many of the classroom exchanges I describe, which are based on students’ in-class writing exercises, are limited to my teaching notes. By not requiring students to submit these writings, I hope they will be able to write more openly and honestly. I ask students to read out loud only those passages they feel comfortable sharing with the class.

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