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## Service Learning in the Honors Composition Classroom: What Difference Does It Make?

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ANN T. PARKER

# Service Learning in the Honors Composition Classroom: What Difference Does It Make?

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## INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a family where helping others was a given. My parents have always been generous with their time, their money, and their tangible donations. I can remember many occasions when we took food, clothes, or household items to families in our community who were in desperate need of such basic necessities.

As a fitting result, I now encourage my own children, ages twelve and fourteen, to volunteer. We assist families during the holidays, make and deliver lunches to children for a local ministry's summer lunch program, and work with a local pet adoption facility to help homeless dogs find permanent homes, just to name a few of the ways we try to help out locally.

Fortunately, many of today's youth have ample opportunities to serve others, not just within their own families but in their schools as well, from elementary age all the way through college. Collection drives for school supplies and canned/dried foods have become commonplace for the students in my community. It is a wonderful sight when kindergartners hop off of the school buses and rush to place their packs of paper and pencils or cans of soup in the designated bins for their less fortunate peers. What a wonderful example of service at such an early age!

This sense of volunteerism that I have grown up with and now work to instill in my own children made me wonder how I could encourage my freshman composition students to become more involved in their community as well. Although I had known many students who were dedicated volunteers through their churches or other organizations such as the Boy Scouts, much too often I heard students espouse the idea "It's all about me." How much money can I make? Why should I care about others' problems? I'm just a college student. I don't have money or time to dedicate to anybody else. I've got enough to worry about just trying to get through the next assignment, the next exam, the next week!!! These are just a few of the comments I would hear when we discussed moving outside the classroom walls, out of the "Ivory Tower," so to speak.

However, the university's Honors Program, which encourages community service among its students and suggests active participation in various volunteer organizations ranging from tutoring local Hispanic high school students to working as campus ambassadors, motivated me to get my Honors Composition students up and at 'em, literally. While composition is not a class that typically features service learning, my Honors Composition II class was the ideal place for this experiment in terms of class size, student motivation, and teacher expectations. The class was small, only twelve students, and I knew even before the semester began that these students were highly motivated to do strong, valuable work in order to keep up their GPA's and their resulting status as honors students. I believed that this was the perfect site for an inaugural exploration of our unit's theme of "Reality versus Make-Believe" and to connect it with service learning, a new concept for the students in this class.

### THE SERVICE PROJECT

In all of my composition classes I require three portfolios over the course of the semester. The portfolios include many components, ranging from daily exploratory writings required to prompt thoughtful class discussions, to photographs that visually support the students' writings, to final, longer papers and reflections that pull together the entire concept of the portfolio. The second portfolio asks students to study a concept of "reality versus make-believe." The subject matter may be whatever students prefer within the parameters of the overall theme. For example, students often choose topics that investigate their declared or potential majors, or the differences between being home-schooled and attending public school. With the honors class, however, I saw this particular portfolio as an opportunity for the students to do more as a group when they thought of their own lives, their own realities, versus what life is like a mere five miles away from our campus in Marietta, Georgia. We all know that life as a college student can be tough in more ways than one—academically, financially, and socially—but these students most often live in a bubble of college life: studying, working, and partying.

I did not want the students to forget what life is like in the real world for many men, women, and children. Poverty, homelessness, and hunger surround *all of us*, *all of the time*, whether we choose to see them or not. So I included a requirement in the second portfolio that the honors students and I would visit our local MUST (Ministries United for Service and Training) to serve breakfast for the residents of the temporary shelter there. Located a few miles down the road from our university, the Elizabeth Inn at MUST is an overnight shelter that houses men, women, and children for up to six months while the residents search for jobs and permanent housing. MUST also offers such services as a food pantry, clothing shop, and resumé and job assistance for the general population in need of such.

This added service component meant that the students and I would have to break into two groups of six students each (plus me), plan what we wanted

to serve for the two visits, arrive at MUST at 5:30 a.m., cook the food, and serve it. One can only imagine the moans I heard when I told them that they had to wake up by 5:00 a.m. to meet me at MUST. "You have *got* to be kidding?" "This is ridiculous!" "I don't know if I can get up at 5:00 a.m.," and on and on. But I stood firm, set the dates for our two visits, and worked to get the students motivated. I told them that the food they served to these men and women might be the only good meal the residents received all day. I reminded the students that each individual we would serve used to be someone's baby and that perhaps that baby's parents had all the hopes and dreams for him or her that their own parents had for them.

I provided an abundance of reasons and encouragement for our volunteerism as the dates drew near, and I also reinforced the idea that this experience was strongly relevant to the "reality versus make-believe" unit on which we were currently focused. At the time, our work in class involved reading, writing about, and discussing applicably related chapters from our textbook, *Seeing & Writing 3*, by Donald and Christine McQuade (2006). These chapters covered society's current notions of gender training, differences in race and class, and challenging visual images. Students were asked to explore in writing and in class conversation various topics related to these three main ideas; for example, one assignment asked them to consider how our attitudes towards different races are formed through societal expectations of skin color. Are we still stereotyping according to cultural cues? Another exploratory assignment asked students to consider how gullible society is when it comes to visual images. In this age of digital and often photo-shopped, air-brushed pictures, what do we need to consider as readers of visual documentation? How can we tell if a visual image is authentic? What is real about the image, or how much has been altered to influence us to reach an expected conclusion? Likewise, with our visits to MUST, I hoped that the students would connect these ideas of what we perceive as real, in this case homelessness, to the validity of that reality. Are all homeless people living on the streets? Do they care if they have jobs? Are they unclean? Why can they not do *something* to help themselves? In the act of serving, students would be faced with the task of better understanding a life that is foreign to them, and through follow-up exploratory writings they would be able to connect reality, make-believe, service, and learning.

A few weeks before we were assigned to serve breakfast, I asked the students to come up with a menu (within each group) that they would like to serve, and I reminded them that they would be doing all of the cooking. I was encouraged to see the two groups jump into the task of menu planning, fully discussing the food and drink options that might be nutritious for the residents without being overwhelming for a group of college kids to prepare. Group One decided on frozen waffles, scrambled eggs, and toast with milk. Group Two went with homemade pancakes, frozen sausage links, and orange juice.

With \$100 and support from the Honors Program Director, I headed to Costco, a national wholesale warehouse, to purchase the food. I was able to get

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more than enough food to serve the expected fifty residents for under \$100, so I splurged and bought butter for the waffles and pancakes as well as some apple juice. The students were feeling good about their food choices when I reported that we were under budget with our shopping. I could tell that they were getting more excited about the prospect of our visits to MUST, even though they still felt the need to complain about the early mornings, which rolled around soon enough.

I arrived by 5:30 a.m. for our first group's visit and was surprised to see one of my students waiting on *me*! We headed to the kitchen building where a few residents were already standing outside at that early hour, met the director of the dining room, and set to work. Within a few minutes, the remaining students arrived, and I quickly "assigned" each student a job. Some kids whipped the eggs, some cooked, some set up the drinks, and everyone stayed busy. I asked everyone to bring a camera, so we all meandered about the kitchen and dining room to take photographs of our personal interpretations of what constitutes reality. Although we were not allowed to take pictures of the residents of the Inn for privacy reasons, the students could take pictures of the facility, the food, the setup, and each other, all of which allowed them to visually support their ideas of reality versus make-believe when they later reflected in writing on their experiences at MUST. The irony of a high-end fashion store's shopping bag full of donations for the kitchen was only one of the visual images that many students quickly noticed and photographed. They were beginning to ask questions about what constitutes the concept of "reality." For some, this means expensive clothes and the worry-free ability to purchase them; for others, it is donated food and someone to prepare it.

By 6:30 a.m., the residents were peeking inside from the porch, asking if they could come in to eat. When the announcement was given, approximately forty men and women of various races and ages poured through the door. They knew the routine: find a table, deposit their belongings that they would need for the day, and get in line to be served. The students enthusiastically greeted the residents and served the food they had carefully prepared. Some of the more outgoing students carried on small conversations with the guests as they moved through the serving line while the shy students offered good morning smiles. The residents were quickly served, and some came back for seconds before the community service volunteers assigned to work at MUST wandered into the kitchen to begin the clean-up.

We were finished. By 7:00 a.m., we were on our way back to campus, and we all were satisfied with our hour and a half of helping others.

The second group of students and I met the next week, with the same positive results. The most fun for me was seeing how concerned this particular group was about making sure that the pancakes they prepared were "perfect." They did not want to serve anything that would not be acceptable. "Yes," I thought. "They're getting it." Of course the residents should not receive less than perfect pancakes. After all, they are people just like the students and me.

## WHAT WAS LEARNED

When we met in class the following morning, after both groups of students had completed their service, we discussed the overall experience and how it fit into our ideas of serving others and what reality is like for more people than we would like to admit. One young man was embarrassed that he had asked if the residents *wanted* pancakes. "Of course they would want the pancakes. They're homeless. What a dumb question," he lamented. But I reminded him that not everyone likes pancakes, so why should we assume that, just because these people are homeless, they are going to eat anything put in front of them? We would not eat just anything, would we?

When the students reflected in writing on their visits to MUST, I saw how much the experience had helped them to reflect on themselves and how they might work to help those less fortunate. Their writing was strong and honest, exhibiting a purposeful voice. A clear connection between service and learning emerged. Chris, in his reflection entitled "The Irony of a Selfish Brat," pondered:

There were so many kinds of people there, and they were probably all born in different situations. I found myself wondering what it was that brought them here. How did they come to be in this situation? Something that Mrs. Parker had said came back to me. She had said that she saw these people and tried to remember that they were someone's baby. That somewhere there was or had been a mother and father who cared for that person. And then I thought about what it would be like for me, with my nice house and my closet full of clothes and my familiar things, if suddenly it were all gone.

[Unexpectedly], I realized that this wasn't about me. All I cared about was helping these people feel comfortable and happy as long as I was there.

And Valerie used the opportunity to reflect on her personal expectations for volunteering when she wrote:

I was kind and helpful. Just like normal, I would suppose you would say. But I think MUST opened up new doors for me. I know that the people I served **were** and **are** every day people. However, I didn't treat them that way. I'm not saying my actions were inappropriate but I think that there is room for improvement. To not consider any circumstances or differences, and treat everyone equally.

It opened my eyes to true reality and I can easily see myself doing something like this in the future.

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Jason addressed the issue of his perception of the homeless prior to our experience:

The most major thing I noticed was how the clients were dressed and how they acted. I was expecting a really rough looking group of antisocials. However, most of them looked as if they were just another person headed off to work in the morning. They were clean and respectable looking, much more so than I would ever have thought. It's sometimes hard to remember that even the poorest of people still have a sense of self-worth and self-image.

He continued:

Our MUST trip was definitely a good experience for me. I realized that people can have it rough without actually living out on the streets every day. There are varying degrees of poverty, and the homeless are not the only ones who need our help. These turned out to be rather friendly, humble people. It was a good reminder that writing papers for college isn't such a pain when finding a meal is the biggest concern for some people.

Finally, Grayson offered this: "I can honestly say that I left MUST Ministries with a better understanding of what 'reality' is and that my world consists of certain aspects that cover 'reality' with whatever 'make-believe' I put into it."

All of the students had similar responses to this first-time experience; even getting out of bed at 5:00 a.m. did not seem so horrible after all.

### **IDEAS FOR OTHERS CONSIDERING SERVICE LEARNING**

Service learning fits easily into the honors composition framework because it asks students to look beyond, think more critically, and then reflect in writing on their experiences. These are a few of the goals that good composition teachers stress in their classes on a daily basis. Other classes can and often do also benefit from service learning. A plethora of organizations and institutions in any small town or large city is begging for assistance at any given time, not just during the holidays. The opportunity to move out of our comfort zones and into the realities of class and ethnic divisions could fit into almost any course. Students in psychology, education, history, or religion classes might benefit from tutoring adult learners, volunteering in nursing homes, or assisting at a religious organization of their choosing. Such instances of getting out of the classroom and into the community offer students (and teachers) the chance to study in an up-close and personal way how choices we make as individuals affect ourselves and so many others. What is life like for an illiterate adult? What can a college student do to help convince an at-risk high schooler to stay in school and graduate? How do some adults make the decision to place their

parents and grandparents into nursing facilities? What are the ramifications for everyone involved in such a choice? These are just a few of the questions that students may explore as a connection between the classroom and the community. Follow-up reflections, research papers, and capstone projects can be the result of connecting service to learning. As a result of these explorations, students are empowered to take what they have learned through service and spread it into other areas of their own lives as well as the lives of others so that the service and the learning do not stop once the project is over.

## CONCLUSION

So, service learning in the composition classroom? Yes, it *does* make a difference. It was an exceptionally fulfilling experience for the students and me in more ways than one. First of all, it got us out of the classroom and into the kitchen, literally and figuratively, in order to provide assistance to those less fortunate than we. Secondly, I believe it helped all of us to re-evaluate and reconsider our own expectations for service to others. The students felt encouraged to seek out volunteer opportunities on their own, and I was eagerly planning to bring another group of students to MUST the following spring. Next, it allowed the students to see another version of reality with which they are rarely confronted, and this tied in nicely with our class discussions of the overall theme of the unit. In other words, do our perceptions and expectations meet the reality of the situation? And lastly, it gave the students and me in our reflections of the MUST experience an opportunity to write, to open up on paper, to ponder, meander, evaluate, and express ourselves through words and visual representation. To compose. Add that to service learning, and one ends up with a great combination for helping others and learning more about oneself.

## EPILOGUE

Currently, one year after the initial field trip, I will take fifteen Honors students to serve breakfast at MUST; they will follow up with a research paper that investigates their individual choices of a local, national, or international social issue, the causes and long-term ramifications of the problem, and suggestions of activities that might allow them to become involved in the solution. Also, I plan to conduct follow-up interviews with the original class of honors students to learn if any of them have continued to seek out volunteer opportunities in other places and what impact those experiences have had on them. I want to know if our visit to MUST a year ago did, indeed, energize them to help others.

The author has received written permission from all students mentioned in the piece above to use their names and examples from their work.

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