

Academic Service Learning in First-Year Writing

Implications for Practice

BY FAITH-ANN MCGARRELL

Teaching first-year college composition requires more than merely communicating the rudiments of style and structure. Students need to understand the writing process, clarify their voices, develop an awareness of audience, and combine these elements with meaningful content. Traditionally, in first-year writing courses, the assignments include writing about personal experiences, reacting to specific short essays and works of poetry, and responding to specific writing prompts. For teachers of these courses, this approach to fulfilling the objectives of the class is familiar, comfortable, and accessible.

Alas, composition teachers have long bemoaned receiving essays that seem empty, trite, or rehearsed—a far cry from what they wish to elicit from their students: writing that reflects thoughtful processing of the writers' ideas about themselves and the world in which they live. A service-based composition class offers an opportunity to involve students in a journey that is both personal—as they discover and develop their own writing voices—and public, as they become a part of their community. In such courses, students write for, with, and about the community, as Tom Deans put it in his seminal work *Writing Partnerships*.¹

Advocates of community-based composition programs point to both affective and cognitive gains for the students, who are empowered to apply the skills taught in composition in a real-life setting. Deans notes through learning experiences such as reflective journaling, discussions, written essays, and reports, students become personally connected to the community. Not only can

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they visualize the people, places, experiences about which they write, but, in the process, they can also make a difference in their communities.²

Surveying Composition Teachers

A 2006 study by the author of this article, *Teacher Success, Assessment, and Evaluation Practices in Service-Learning Composition Courses*, set out to evaluate how teachers of first-year writing conducted their courses.³ Survey responses from 38 faculty members were collated, along with interviews with two program directors and eight faculty members currently integrating service

learning into first-year writing. Course syllabi from the respondents' classes were also obtained and analyzed.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What do service-learning composition courses look like?
2. What perceptions do teachers in service-learning composition programs have about their success in ensuring that composition and service outcomes are achieved?
3. What perceptions do teachers of composition have about success in teaching content and service-related skills?
4. What are the differences between the practices used to assess performance in service-learning activities and those used to assess performance in other aspects of the course?
5. How do teachers evaluate whether service-learning opportunities have helped students master stated composition objectives and outcomes?
6. Do teachers perceive service goals as compatible with composition goals, or do they perceive them as separate from composition goals?

Service-Learning Projects

In composition courses, academic service learning may take several forms. The instructor may have students collaborate with a national, regional, or local non-profit service agency to create brochures, newsletters, or public-service announcements.⁴ Or, as part of the requirements for the course, students might serve in the local K-12 school district as tutors, mentors, or volunteers for a specific number of hours. They would then use their written field notes and reflections as the basis for class discussion and written assignments on issues relating to social justice and community development. The goal of each experience is to provide students with experiences that both meet the requirements for the writing course and aid the partnering agency.

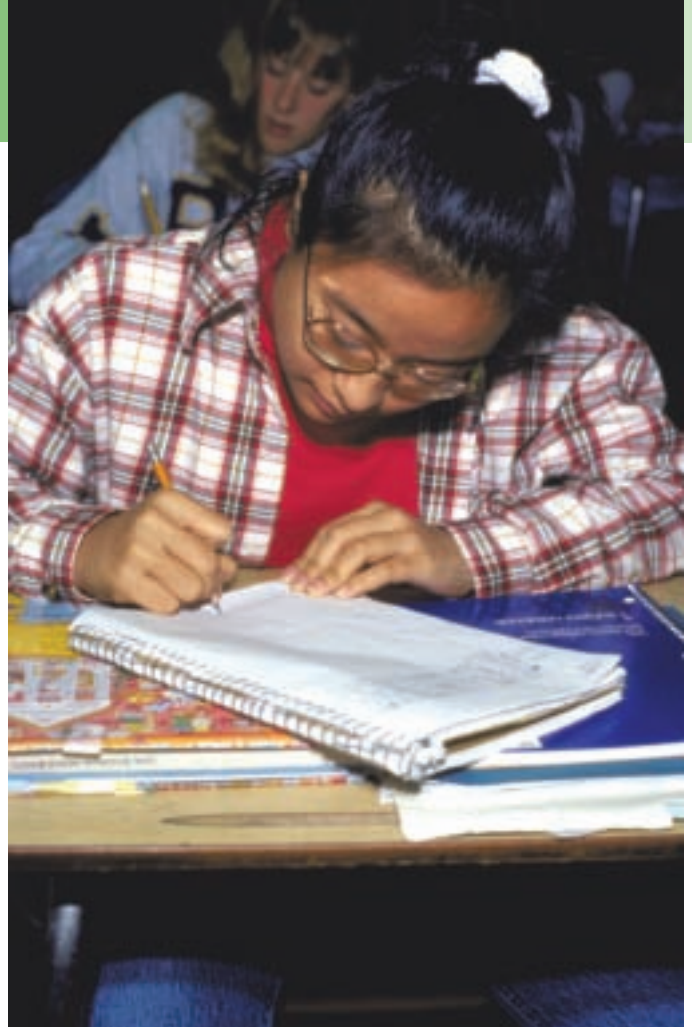
Service learning might also mean having students read and write about topics of importance to the local community and then writing on social issues such as poverty, literacy, homelessness, substance abuse, rights and responsibilities of citizens, and so on. Student compositions are shared with the community in the local paper, a community Website, or at a community meeting.⁵

The teachers' responses to the survey revealed that most incorporated similar models in their classes. One first-year writing course partnered with a local Eldercare Program. The students interviewed the residents and recorded information about their lives. Then, each student collected photographs, found pictures of events that had occurred during their interviewee's lifetime, and organized their written story around the collected images. These stories were then evaluated and revised using the traditional writing process format found in most composition classes. By the end of the semester, each student had completed a story on an individual within the Eldercare program. A bound copy of each story went to the members of the Eldercare Program, the student, and the teacher.

Students enrolled in another course developed an informational Website for a local community agency. In consultation with both the partnering agency and the instructor, to ensure that material promoted the agency's mission. The students also participated in all aspects of redesigning and developing the Website, which developed their written and technological skills. The instructor used a portfolio approach to evaluate the required assignments. Each subsequent semester, the students in the first-year writing course had the responsibility of maintaining and updating the site in consultation with the community partnering agency.

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emerged for first-year writing classes except that students wrote, as Deans noted, for, with, and about the community. Academic service learning in composition classes at the two universities surveyed incorporated the following projects: reading and writing about social issues; creating a Web presence for community agencies/writing newsletter items; tutoring younger students in writing; recording on paper the stories of children and elders; and volunteering at community centers followed by writing reflective responses about the experience.

The diversity of service learning in composition courses offers rich opportunities for personal growth. However, according to the literature, it also poses a challenge for the curriculum of any discipline. The main challenge, according to Kerissa Heffernan,⁶ is that faculty in various disciplines find it difficult to merge the course content goals and their service goals without sacrificing one for the other.

Key Findings

My study produced several key findings. Overall, participants in both the survey and interview phases believed they were successful in integrating composition with service and in assessing and in evaluating composition and service outcomes, using a va-

riety of assessment tools and instruction methods. In the survey responses, themes such as positive departmental support and years of teaching at the current institution emerged as critical to the respondents' perceived sense of success. For survey and interview respondents, the fragmentation of course outcomes, poor quality of reflection, and the lack of importance respondents placed on community partners emerged as themes that militated against their perception of success.

Departmental Support and Years of Experience

Faculty perception of success was also influenced by the teacher's rank and the number of years in his or her current position. Those with four to seven years of teaching experience at the current institution reported higher feelings of success than those with fewer than four years. Teachers holding an academic rank above instructor level were also more likely to describe themselves as *successful* or *very successful* at integrating service learning in their composition classes.

The seamless integration of service with first-year writing is a challenge. Instructors with less experience in doing this often encounter difficulties because, over time, these kinds of courses tend to undergo a metamorphosis, becoming something other than either entirely composition or service courses, which often results in their being moved to another department. If a teacher lacks experience balancing service objectives and content objectives, this may cause an imbalance that either degrades the content objectives or the service component. The course instructor must become adept at balancing (and achieving) both curriculum requirements and service goals. He or she needs to maintain flexibility, constantly revisiting and realigning class goals to meet any unanticipated situations that may occur during the semester, with the specific group of students, or because of the needs of the partnering service agency. For example, when given the survey to distribute to their composition teachers, several department chairs surveyed said that these courses were no longer included in the English department offerings. The composition-related objectives of these courses had been obscured by the demands and program objectives of the service partners, causing the courses to be assigned to other departments.

Fragmented Course Outcomes

The fragmentation of outcomes emerged as an area of great concern. Student success was often measured only in terms of the service component or the writing component of the class. Survey respondents indicated that they perceived themselves as successful at integrating the objectives for service experiences with the objectives for writing. Their syllabi, however, indicated oth-

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erwise. For example, separate outcomes and objectives were listed for writing and for service. This gave the impression that service was "tacked on" rather than integrated into the course, which corresponded to Heffernan's conclusions after reviewing more than 900 syllabi from a variety of content area disciplines.⁷ There was a definite disconnect between syllabi content and teacher perceptions.

Thus, while the goal for service learning is the seamless integration of goals and out-

comes, this seems difficult to achieve.

Interview responses provided further insight into how outcomes might shift within a semester depending on the nature of the class, the needs of the students, and the instructor's perception of essential content for the course. One interview respondent shared how her first-year writing seminar took a very different and fluid direction in terms of ideas generated during a class discussion:

"When you put students in communities, especially impoverished communities, which was my aim—it wasn't to do any kind of service like volunteering in a hospital or something like that—then you have a lot of things to teach them. So . . . , I did a course called 'Why is there poverty?' That was a first-year seminar and that was the main question of the course: why, in the richest country in the world, are some people living in very, very difficult circumstances? And so we looked at a variety of ways that poverty can be seen and have causes that are connected to other causes. . . . I consider it [service learning] rich in the possibilities for writing because there's a lot to talk about." (Program Respondent 2A, Interview)

The writing in this course took a different direction than had originally been planned. Students wrote reflective pieces born out of their service experiences and class discussions rather than focusing on the nature of research writing. The instructor asserted her belief that the changes were appropriate, since they were based on ideas that had emerged during the semester, and that the new curriculum fit the nature of the class, the needs of the individual participants, and her desire to be flexible. Others might argue that veering away from the integrated outcomes to emphasize only one area sacrificed composition in favor of service.

Poor Reflection

While both interview and survey respondents agreed with the literature that reflection was an essential component for any course that paired service with learning, they were dismayed at their inability to elicit thoughtful, in-depth reflection from their students. Oral reflections shared during class discussions often contained stereotypes and bias about service experiences or those

whom the students served. Some respondents lamented their inability to prompt students to respond either in writing or in class discussion.

To stimulate better student responses, some teachers provided prompts and open-ended questions. However, this did not necessarily produce “good reflection.” One respondent felt that because of the way the service-learning component of the course had been structured, students did not see reflection as an integral part of their projects. In this course, reflection had primarily functioned as a project management and tracking strategy (“keep a work log or a research notebook”). Program Respondent 1D noted, “I’ve stopped doing it because students didn’t seem to spend time with it and I got bad work.” To remedy the situation, he shifted to end-of-project reflection. While the results improved, the respondent remained dissatisfied with his ability to elicit thoughtful reflection from his students.

One of the goals of a service-learning composition class is for students to be able to articulate connections and integrate what they have learned, observed, or experienced with actual practice. The survey responses suggested that students need prompting and guidance to go beyond the “pat” response to produce more comprehensive and thoughtful insight, both in written and oral reflection.

Absent Community Partners

Finally, in written responses to the survey, there was little mention of the role of community partners and agencies in helping teachers transmit the goals of service and achieve writing outcomes. Half the respondents said they relied on partner evaluations in assessing service-related coursework. However, none of them said they asked partnering agencies to assess the students’ writing. Only two of those interviewed specifically mentioned the role of partners. One said the partners provided support through guest lecturing; the other said that the partners served on an advisory board and participated in decision-making about how best to collaborate to achieve the desired writing outcomes.



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The Challenges for Higher Education

Practitioners may well question, in composition as well as in other disciplines, how to align the goals of the discipline and those of service, while still maintaining academic integrity.⁸ What is the role of the teacher in ensuring consonance between academic goals and the outcomes desired by community-service partners/organizations? Are alignment and integration necessary or even possible? Above all, how can the teacher ensure and enhance student learning?

Unfortunately, the current research does not provide any clear conclusions or answers to these questions. Identifying and aligning outcomes, both within the discipline and in the area of service, continue to be a source of concern, along with teachers’ perceptions of how to accomplish these goals in their classes. Further research and investigation should be undertaken in this area.

In North America, colleges that wish to join organizations such as National Campus Compact will be required to implement an ex-

PLICIT framework in order to operate a campus-wide service-learning program: Specific courses are designated as “service” courses, a philosophy of service or introductory service course is included in the general-education requirement, and there must be an office of service or community-based learning on campus. For participating schools, the focus shifts from simply having students participate in service opportunities to a purposeful integration of service into the curriculum and academic learning. For Adventist colleges and universities, there is value in seeing service as a divine imperative, a commitment, and a transformative experience, but also having the institutional structure prescribed by organizations such as National Campus Compact.

The challenge for our colleges and universities will continue to be deciding to what extent the curriculum can support integration of service without sacrificing time students need to focus on content knowledge so that they can compete in an increasingly product-driven economy. This by no means demeans the value of volunteerism and community service as a necessary part of an au-

thentic Adventist education; instead, there is room to incorporate all of these concepts. Limiting service to either altruism or activism limits our potential for enhancing our students' academic skills and character development. Altruism (the concern for the well-being of others and the greater good without thought for one's own gain), and activism (intentional action to resolve social challenges within the community), go hand in hand.

Many questions and challenges remain, as teachers and administrators seek to identify their individual roles in supporting service learning. Teachers, specifically, face a challenge when trying to align the academic outcomes of their courses with the desires of partnering agencies. Both teachers and administrators face a challenge in avoiding an unequal partnership, where those doing the planning—the college's service-learning coordinator or the course instructor—determines, without consultation, what services are required for the good of the community. Instead, there must be dialogue between the organization providing the service and the one receiving the service; so that both parties gain from the experience, and both academic and service goals are achieved. Dialogue with the community or partnering agency is essential to addressing these challenges.

In order for academic service learning to continue to be suc-

cessful in Adventist higher education, administrators must recognize that faculty motivation or willingness to implement such pedagogy is critical to its success.⁹ In the author's study and others, departmental support proved to be a major indicator of successful implementation. Institutions will also need to provide mentoring for new faculty and those who are new to the pedagogy. Those with few years of teaching express greater frustration over having to integrate new pedagogy in addition to other demands, and those unfamiliar with the pedagogy may need a rationale for implementation. Success also means recognizing that aligning course objectives with service may mean a shift in thinking about objectives, as well as changes in the nature of the course. Finally, in order for academic service learning to achieve its potential, faculty will need to continually strive to achieve true, seamless integration of service into the course, rather than using a "tacked-on," piecemeal approach.

Thus, the challenge for Adventist colleges and universities is to commit themselves to creating and sustaining a climate where service learning can flourish within the context of the religious, academic, and social goals of their institutions. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Tom Deans, *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 2000).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 173-182.
3. Faith-Ann McGarrell, *Teacher Success, Assessment, and Evaluation Practices in Service-Learning Composition Courses* (Dissertation Abstract International, 68(08) [UMI No. AAT 3279248], Andrews University, 2007).
4. Several examples of service learning and composition across the United States are shared in *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition*, Linda-Adler Kassner, et. al., ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Higher Education, 1997).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Kerissa Heffernan, *Fundamentals of Service-Learning Course Construction* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Campus Compact, 2001). Heffernan reviewed more than 900 syllabi in multiple content areas for clarity and integration of content objectives with service-learning objectives. Her study revealed a conflict between service objectives and content objectives.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Kassner, et. al., *op cit.*
9. In work interviews, respondents at both universities noted that their own community involvement strongly influenced their willingness to practice academic service-learning pedagogy in their courses. This is in line with work done by Amy Driscoll, "Studying Faculty and Service-Learning Directions for Inquiry and Development," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (Fall 2002), pp. 35-41; and Elisa Abes, et. al., "Factors that Motivate and Deter Faculty Use of Service-Learning," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (Fall 2002), pp. 5-17.

