

CETL

Melissa Brandt

Capstone Project

Service-Learning in the Composition Classroom

I teach English 101:Composition. I chose to teach my class in a Service-Learning based environment, which (for my students) means, spending time in with a non-profit organization and applying that time to “real world” writing.

My first Service-Learning experience was in 11th grade about 20 years ago. I enrolled in a class for High School called Student Volunteer Services. I spent an hour each day with students that were severely physically disabled. I didn’t want to sign up for the class, but did so at the urging of an advisor. I loved it.

One of my favorite memories of this time was during a game we were playing with the students on modified scooters. A disabled student, Michael, continued to slide down the scooter and end up half on the floor. I would slide him back up and tighten the Velcro...and Michael would slide back down. Soon we were laughing not as a student to a disabled student, but as two teenagers.

Stereotypes of the disabled began to fall away. We became friends and I became interested in the community.

After that class, I spent summers working with autistic children and the physically disabled. I volunteered in the community for causes that needed my help. I became an active, important, contributing member of the social world and I wanted to pass that wonderful feeling on to others.

HOW:

My course is set up similar to a standard composition course in the sense that the students in my class are required to write similar academic papers as instructors in other composition classes require. I adjusted the length of the papers the students are writing slightly to compensate for the extra time they are required to spend out of class.

I formed relationships with three different organizations in Mankato, MN:

The Harry Meyering Center for disabled adults.

The Open Door Health Clinic is an organization, which provides low cost or free health care for anyone who needs assistance.

Partners for Affordable Housing an organization that works with the homeless shelters in Mankato.

I had presenters from each of the three different non-profit organizations enter the classroom and share a little bit about the organization and what the students would be required to do at the facility.

Each student was required to commit to one facility and spend 10-15 hours of time working with the clients and staff at the organization.

Each organization asked something a little different from the students.

HMC- primarily social...setting up for parties and crafts and spending time with the clients.

Open Door- primarily structured. Greeting clients, making phone calls, filing.

Partners for Affordable Housing more unstructured...making dinner and playing games with the children in the shelters.

I have a final presenter from the University coming into the classroom to discuss grant writing. The students were required to research and write grant letters to gather funds for a final project. For the final project the students designed a volunteer brochure or newsletter (depending on the organization) that will actually be produced for each of the three organizations.

They will also get to keep their produced work for their resume/portfolio.

READINGS:

I have tried to make all of the reading applicable as well. They are reading Nickel and Dimed (about the difficulties of surviving on Minimum wage) and several other articles relating to minimum wage. We are watching a few films including A Great Wonder: The Lost Boys of the Sudan and reading articles on immigrants, along with any other materials relating to the disabled. The students use these articles to write the academic papers of the class like a Summary, Critique, and Argument Synthesis.

My main goals for the class are to give the students' academic writing knowledge, as well as an attempt to raise social awareness in a time when I believe we are desperate for it.

STUDENT FEEDBACK:

The students have been very receptive. Non-traditional students seem to understand the “real world” application a bit more, but overall they are open to the project.

“I think that it is an extremely wonderful idea to have students get involved in the community and do things for others. In the school year you get so wrapped up in your own life and business that you don’t get a chance to look around you and into the community...I think that it is a wonderful idea to also connect it with other things, like we are with the brochures.”

“I’m proud to have picked your class for Composition. I think it’ll be one class out of this semester that I get something more than just learning the context. This class got me to go out and do something more than just taking class. I hope that in the end, it was a class that I can tell others to take because it’s more than just English.”

“I think that this class is much more beneficial than a regular composition class because not only is it something to put on a resume for community service and you are helping an organization. You learn the aspects you need in case you ever become part of another organization that needs grants written or brochures created. I feel that this class is the most useful of all the classes I have taken so far because I am introduced to things outside of the campus.”

Service learning teaches a real-world experience that cannot be found in the classroom. Learning the importance of helping others and treating everyone with respect are important life-skills that continue even after college ends. Communication, commitment and compassion are further developed in the service-learning process. In addition to the satisfaction of helping others, I have had the chance participate in a new experience that I haven’t pursued before. Service learning reminds us that learning extends beyond what’s happening in classroom lectures.