After attending the 2005 NCPTW/IWCA Conference and hearing Victor Villanueva, and others, talk about making a difference in the classroom and in the writing center, it finally dawned on me that Service Learning was not just another phrase. As a graduate student at Minnesota State University, Mankato (MnSU) entering my second semester of teaching, the Spring 2006 semester seemed like the perfect time to attempt a course designed around this concept. In writing, it seemed like a great idea; as an instructor, the idea seemed very exciting; but how would the students accept the idea? What relevance would Service Learning have in the English Composition 101 classroom, the only class required of all students at MnSU?

Dr. Randall McClure, the Graduate Assistant Director of English at MnSU, frequently reminds the Graduate Assistants and Teaching Assistants that teaching is part instruction and part “used car sales”; to effectively introduce an alternative plan like this to English Composition, it would be important to come equipped with excitement, motivation, and a few concessions to entice the students along. As much as I wanted the students, mostly freshmen, to be excited about the idea and volunteer because it was good for them and because they wanted to, I knew that Dr. McClure was right—I needed a few selling points. There were a number of concessions that could have been used in this situation; I opted to target their financial needs and workload.

The previous semester, the number one complaint expressed by students was the cost of the textbook. This is often a sensitive area for students because typically the burden of purchasing these texts rests solely on their shoulders. When thinking of how to
“compensate” students, this area seemed like a logical place to start. Having gathered a number of texts and useful essays in my academic career, I decided to do away with a required textbook. The materials that the students would use throughout the semester would be: my lecture notes, articles they found using JSTOR and other databases available through the MnSU library, web sources, and documents that I would bring in from time to time. When my students realized I was not joking about not requiring a text, that they would not have to pay 60-100 dollars, they were eager to hear what else I had to say. On paper it sounded great and to their wallets it sounded even better.

Another concession was the lengths of their papers; compared to the previous semester each paper was approximately two pages shorter. The course is intended to be a writing intensive class so this was a serious concession. However, if the students were going to be expected to volunteer 25-30 hours over the course of the semester and the expected workload for them would be a two-to-one ratio of hours in class to hours spent out of class, then something was going to have to give. Just because the length of the papers would be decreased did not mean that they would be writing less. To supplement the writing outside of class, I planned many in-class writing activities, and required the students to write one to two page papers weekly. The weekly papers would either: a) reflect upon the activities at their Service Learning organization, or b) require them to read an article and respond to it.

Perhaps a better balance could be reached with the number of required Service Learning hours and then fewer concessions could be made. However, after speaking with many of the organizations in the area I quickly learned that most of the organizations had little need for someone willing to volunteer for less than 20 hours. Not that they would
turn them away but in order to justify the time spent training a volunteer, doing the
(sometimes necessary) background check, and to juggle schedules, most organizations
wanted at least 20 hours of the student’s time. In order to really benefit from the Service
Learning experience, 20 or more hours seems to be necessary. At that level of
commitment, the students will be unable to achieve all the hours in a single day and will
then start making connections with the people at the organization they have chosen.

Allowing the students to choose their organization was very important. Having
volunteered in the past, I knew how awkward the experience could be the first time. To
minimize the awkwardness, I allowed the student to choose their organization. Over the
Christmas break I contacted a number of the organizations and met with many of them.
Having made these connections allowed me to “sell” the idea to the students better. In
the event they did not like the ones I had contacted, MnSU also offers a Service Learning
Fair at the beginning of each semester. This Service Learning Fair invited all
organizations interested in student volunteers to come to campus to inform the students of
the different available opportunities. I required that my students attend the Service
Learning Fair and that they write their first weekly paper on their experience.

Not only does allowing students to select their organization help to minimize the
awkwardness of the experience, but it also bestows upon them an ownership of the
experience. Instead of volunteering at “Organization A” because the instructor said so,
they are volunteering for “Organization A” because they selected it. This also allowed
flexibility for students to choose organizations outside of the ones that attended the
Service Learning Fair. It was surprising to learn how many already volunteered their
time, or were part of organizations that they had directly benefited from in their youth.
Of the twenty-six students in my class, seven were already involved with different organizations. With the concessions being made, and the organizations selected, the next step was to tie the writing back to the course.

First, as mentioned earlier, I required them to write a weekly paper. This was a short assignment, but it required that they were always working on something. The topic could either be about their experiences at their Service Learning activity, or it would be in response to an article that they had to find using JSTOR (or some similar database). Each of the articles selected for weekly paper topics had some kind of social relevance. Here are a few examples: an NPR interview with Julian Bond (chairperson of the NAACP), “Maid to Order” by Barbara Ehrenreich, “The Voice of Voices in the Writer of Color” by Victor Villanueva, and a 2004 program by NPR about Definitions of Marriage. Since many of the essays were only available through databases, the first few class periods were spent explaining how to access the database and how to find the articles. This served multiple purposes, not only did they learn how to utilize the tools available to them through the university, but it also saved on the cost of textbooks. These weekly papers, worth 15% of their total grade, were then fodder for class discussion, and since they had taken the time to write something about them, nearly everyone had something to contribute. At least for the first month nearly all students had to go through this process of locating the articles and responding to them, but as many of the students began to attend their Service Learning organizations they chose to write about them instead.

Aside from the weekly papers, students were also required to write five longer, more formal, papers; the first of which was a Summary. In order to make this assignment relevant to Service Learning, students had to select a current event from a local paper.
For the purposes of the course, current events were limited to anything less than 30 days old, and “local” was defined as being within the state of Minnesota. This assignment accounted for 10% of their grade.

The next paper was a Critique and a longer in length than the Summary. It required them to critique a policy or law. It had to be a local (as defined earlier) policy or law, and the students had to choose criteria before hand. The criteria had to be clearly defined and explored throughout the essay as they discussed why the law, or policy, was just or unjust. This assignment accounted for 15% of their grade.

Explanatory Synthesis was the third major paper, and not surprisingly it was longer than the previous two. For this assignment students were required to select an issue facing the “local community”, and provide multiple perspectives on the issue. This paper was to be devoid of their opinion, but to express at least two opposing views of their topic. This assignment accounted for 15% of their grade.

The last big paper was an Argumentative Research Paper where they combined all the elements of the earlier papers. They selected a local issue, law, or policy of which they wanted to argue one side. Students could choose the format in which the paper would be written, but it had to include some kind of summary of the issue, law, or policy, and had to anticipate at least one of the opposition’s arguments. Then they had to refute, accept, or in someway address these opposing argument(s). This assignment was worth 25% of their grade.

The last paper was a personal reflection paper, where they simply reflect upon their Service Learning experience. They included their initial reactions and thoughts, as
well as what they actually did at the organization, and last what they learned or how they now feel about the project. This accounted for 10% of their final grade.

The last 10% of their grade was earned by doing in-class activities. These activities included reading essays and responding in class, presenting information orally to the class, reading another student’s works and giving written critical feedback for their peer’s paper, practicing with MLA or APA formatting, and creating alternative introductions and conclusions for their papers.

To encourage community within the University, I also offered a few extra credit opportunities if they attended various programs on campus. For example, they could receive extra credit for attending: “Community Voices” (people from the community are invited to come and talk about how they became involved in the community), “Life Is?” (a nationally touring play examining different walks of life), and “The Laramie Project” (a nationally touring play about the murder of Matthew Shepard). I also offered an ongoing extra credit assignment for students to submit their argumentative papers as editorials. I provided them with the contact information for all of the local newspapers. The extra credit was not contingent upon the publication of their article, but merely on the submission. A cover letter, copy of the essay, and an addressed stamped envelope were required as verification of the submission. I would then mail it for them. These extra credit opportunities could take the place of one in-class activity, in the event they should miss one—or it could allow them to exceed 100% for that portion of their grade.

As one might expect, at first students were nervous about doing something different. Why was this section different from all the others? As they grew accustomed to the approach many of them thoroughly enjoyed the experience. It would be an
exaggeration to say that all of the students loved it. Nor would it be a good fir for every instructor. Juggling regular instruction on top of verification of whether or not the students achieved their required hours is not an easy task. That being said, it provides many opportunities to make a difference in the classroom and local community. It also allows students an opportunity to voice their concerns about the community around them, instead of focusing on the larger topics that may not seem as personally relevant to college freshmen. As an instructor, the change in focus was refreshing.

The Service Learning opportunity also allowed students to tap the people involved with the organization as resources. If they so chose, they could write about policies, laws, or issues facing their volunteer organization. The few students that took on this challenge found that it was much easier to do research; which often consisted of interviewing the directors of their respective organizations. Many of the directors were involved in the community in other ways, so if they did not have the answer, they could point them to someone who did. This demonstrated networking to students-an other useful practical skill for college and beyond. Through the use of personal interviews, not only did the students benefit from the resources around them, but they also connected with a real person making their chosen paper topics come alive. In this day of technology where student research often consists of merely “googling” a topic, so to speak, this was a breath of fresh air.