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**ACADEMIC SERVICE LEARNING IN
AN ENGLISH METHODS CLASS:
A PRACTICAL APPROACH**

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Academic Service Learning is more prevalent in contemporary discussions among college and public school teachers than it was when I was becoming a teacher. As a college writing instructor, I was introduced to “service learning” in the early 1990s, but I hadn't really mastered a clear understanding of the term until well into the new millennium, and then only after I was asked to review *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition* by Thomas Deans. In the book, Deans uses the backdrop of John Dewey's “reflective inquiry” (31) and Paulo Freire's “praxis” (41) to argue that service learning in the composition classroom “represent[s] a vital bridge between inquiry and action” (171). Reading Deans’ text was just the start of my quest to learn more about Academic Service Learning (hereafter, ASL) and to find ways to introduce related concepts into my English Education courses. Future English/ Language Arts teachers, in part because of their interest in connecting their students writing to the “real world,” are likely to be sought out for ideas that combine issues such as service, writing, and reflection. Helping those teachers become prepared to make such connections should be part of our agendas as teacher educators. The inclusion of ASL into our training of future educators in English/ Language Arts invites them to relate to the lives of their students in a more relevant way because the writing they do is in response to the “real” world beyond school walls.

In this essay, my goal is to make the possible inclusion of ASL a more appealing strategy for those who teach English/ Language Arts courses for future teachers. First, I'll give my reasons for wanting to introduce ASL to my English Education students. Subsequently, I'll describe an activity I designed for

my EN 309 (The Teaching of Writing) course at Northern Michigan University. I want other English Education professionals to have more exposure to ASL resources and lesson plan ideas.

Background

I decided to incorporate ASL into my methods courses this year because I had become more comfortable with the concept. A grant that I received from Northern Michigan University's Education Department (thanks to a larger grant via the University Consortium to Advance Academic Service-Learning in Michigan) offered financial support to my English Education students who were selected to participate in the annual convention of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English. It also allowed me to purchase a number of books on service learning. After reading *Service-Learning in Higher Education*, *Service Learning for the Multiple Intelligences Classroom*, and *A-to-Z Community & Service Learning* (among other texts), I developed a better understanding of what service learning is. Service-learning, when explored in depth, can be described as

a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning. (Jacoby 5)

Similarly, on NMU's Education Department's Academic Service Learning web site, the following practical definition can be found:

Academic Service Learning is a curricular approach, which involves the integration of community service with academic goals. Successful service learning experiences consist of preparation, service, reflection, and celebration.

Both definitions mesh well with the goals of a methods course, including asking students to become

reflective and articulate members of the educational community through the construction of lesson plans, the presentation of teaching demonstrations, and frequent interactions with students and professionals in the schools.

Additionally, it's important to remember that an array of benefits stems from incorporating ASL into the classroom, including improved self-assurance, risk-taking, leadership skills, empathy, and motivation to learn (Berman 17). All of these are qualities that we want to foster in our future teachers and that we hope they will pass on to their own students in their English/Language Arts classrooms. The lesson I describe here offers simply one way to invite our English Education students to consider how ASL might benefit their students and themselves.

I incorporated ASL into my English Education courses for two reasons. First, ASL offers students an opportunity to reflect critically on their own experiences and the experiences of others involved in the educational process. This kind of metacognitive processing is not only an objective of many teacher education programs in Michigan (including Northern's) but also a goal of NCTE's Conference on English Education. Second, ASL encourages students to view themselves as a part of the academic community and of the larger communities in which they live and work. Service learning projects require teachers to take the initiative, to go beyond the curriculum, and to imagine themselves and their students as active agents of change in their communities rather than pawns of a rigid curriculum set in motion by a detached bureaucratic body. It is vital for our future teachers to imagine themselves as active participants if they are to develop agency as professionals in English/Language Arts.

Reflection is essential to agency. According to Duncan Carter and Sherrie Gradin, reflection is "central to learning and to taking thoughtful, compassionate, and appropriate action in the world"(2). And though I am less likely to identify myself as a proponent of critical pedagogy than some of my peers, I do view my pedagogy as critically

reflective, valuing the affective as well as the socio-cognitive components of teaching and learning. The introduction of ASL elements into English Education classe, in addition to allowing teachers to help students become reflective about the social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of writing instruction, would provide all teachers, regardless of their epistemological leanings, with opportunities to reflect on their own assumptions about writing, teaching, and learning.

The Lesson

To introduce ASL to my "Teaching of Writing" students, I first shared with them the above-mentioned definitions and benefits, then informed them that they would develop collaboratively a list of ways to integrate writing assignments into service learning projects. We next discussed students' own experiences with ASL (if any). One student had been involved as a tutor for Big Brothers/Big Sisters in conjunction with a requirement for community service in a college leadership program. A couple of others had shared reading/writing activities with elementary students. A few had been involved in classrooms where teachers asked them to write for outside audiences such as those in senior citizen's centers or preschools. None had been asked to write a lesson plan including ASL before, though a few mentioned having been introduced to the concept in one of my colleague's classes. (Delinda Lybrand, an NMU professor and teacher of methods courses for future elementary Language Arts teachers, also received an ASL grant from our Education department [Mallo 2].)

Students were then supplied with photocopies of selected pages from Imogene Forte and Sandra Schurr's excellent text *A-to-Z Community & Service Learning*. These copy-ready worksheets were designed originally as "a collection of instructional tools, techniques, projects, and lessons" for use with junior high students (7). Each page is dedicated to a different service or community project and includes directions for students to follow.

Additionally, in some cases, there are also suggestions for teachers who might want to use the

handouts in their classes. I was thrilled that many of the lessons included extensive use of Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Development, Williams' Taxonomy of Creative Thought, and Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences because I had introduced two of the three concepts to students in a previous lesson. Students were invited to consider these theories as they designed two-week unit plans as a part of their final portfolio for our class.

As students moved into groups of three or four, they worked together, generating a series of potential writing activities to be used in conjunction with ASL projects. Since my class is made up of both elementary and secondary education majors, I altered Forte and Schurr's text by asking my students to create writing assignments or activities for grades ranging from Kindergarten to 12th grade. I expected some students to struggle with what kinds of assignments might work with ASL projects, so while they were working in groups, I brainstormed the following list of possible writing activities on the overhead: journals, diary entries, letters, essays, advertisements, poems, stories, how-to explanations, compare-contrast assignments, lists, reflections, etc. (We had, at one time or another, talked about these types of assignments for elementary and/or secondary students, so students were familiar with the items on my list.)

While many of the handouts designed by Forte and Schurr offered writing tasks as part of their recommended activities for middle schoolers, my students were encouraged to go beyond those suggested. For instance, on a page entitled "A is for Animal Rights and Protection," students are directed to "list all the [animal service] agencies" in their community, and to "create a brochure ... promot[ing] community awareness of services available" Students in my class came up with the following supplementary assignments for students interested in working on the issue of animal rights:

Write a narrative from an animal's point of view or a caretaker's point of view.

Write a letter to a shelter and ask what children can do to help them.

Visit an animal shelter and write about what it's like to play with or walk the animals.

Write a dialogue between animals about what it feels like to be in a shelter.

Similarly, on the "C is for Community Haunts and Hideouts" page, students are instructed to "brainstorm a number of favorite places kids like to go within their community and then to create a Community Directory that includes "descriptions and illustrations" (13). Students in my class thought that their future students might also like to do the following activities:

Write a short story about a favorite place you visit in your community.

Write a letter to the editor arguing for why your favorite place should be visited by more people.

Likewise, on the page entitled "M is for Membership in Clubs, Cliques, and Committees," students are asked to compare and contrast these three different kinds of student organizations. They are also instructed to write "personal essay[s] or journal entr[ies]" in which they discuss their feelings about cliques. In addition to the wonderful suggestions offered by Forte and Schurr, my students constructed the list of additional activities below:

Write an essay about how to form a club at school, taking into consideration all the issues involved with school censorship.

Draw a poster to recruit members for a club or committee.

Read *The Outsiders* and discuss the pros and cons of cliques.

Visit a club's meeting and report in an essay what members do and how visitors are treated.

When students had finished generating ideas in small groups, each group presented its ideas to the class and discussed why those assignments might work at different age levels and within various unit plans. Students regularly synthesized information taken from class texts to offer support for their assignment choices. One group, for instance, talked about how the unit on clubs might work well with middle

school-aged students who are often asked to choose between competing extracurricular activities. Having students role-play members of both groups and asking them to write about their reasons for wanting to recruit new members might help students to learn to compare and contrast without being emotionally charged. Likewise, high school students might benefit greatly from an extended discussion of a novel that focuses on cliques.

Students thought about not only what types of assignments they'd give but also how long they would plan for students to be engaged in that work and how they would evaluate the work done. This required students to consider issues related to time, classroom-management, rubrics, and teacher feedback on all things that we'd discussed earlier in the term. In considering what kinds of work they'd assign, students also measured whether they'd ask their future students do multiple drafts of pieces or not, drawing on conversations we'd had in response to Nancie Atwell's use of peer workshops.

Students also reflected on their own experiences with writing in classes where the writing stayed focused on academic issues rather than the world outside of school. Several individuals shared that if they had been asked to write for, or in response to, people or problems outside school walls, they might have been more motivated to see writing as a meaningful act of communication rather than merely as a required school activity. This revived a dialogue about student motivation, emotion, and writing which had been sparked earlier in the semester by several of the essays in *Writing, Teaching, Learning*, one of our textbooks.

After a hearty discussion and lots of requests for me to email the notes I took during group presentations, I ended the lesson by asking students to reflect on what they might do to revise their lesson/unit plans to incorporate service learning and/or writing activities.

Reflection

This lesson was tremendous! It presented students with ways to think about ASL as a non-threatening curricular component. Many teachers or

future teachers ñ when approached about service learning ñ worry about the time it might take away from state-mandated subjects, or fret about the time and energy it might take them to coordinate with people or organizations outside the school buildings. Thinking about ASL as an integrated element of the writing curriculum, regardless of the subject or grade level being taught, helps ease teachers' fears about fitting ASL into their already busy schedules.

This activity also encouraged students to think about how writing could work as a part of any lesson plan. We use writing to communicate, to express, to reflect, to argue, to consider, to plan, and to share ourselves. The goals of ASL are a good match with those included in "The English Language Arts Content Standards and Benchmarks" a part of the Michigan Curriculum Framework. The "Vision Statement" for the English Language Arts states, "Through the English language arts, we learn to appreciate, integrate, and apply what is learned for real purposes in our homes, schools, communities, and workplaces." By contemplating ways that their future students might use writing in ASL projects, my English Education students were able to associate lessons in the classroom with authentic learning situations.

Many of my students are now considering adding an ASL component to their unit plans for my class. By doing so, they are beginning to relate their future classrooms (and their students) to the world at large (and to communities in particular). In addition, students are reflecting on ways that the other elements of writing instruction we've discussed on such as the *Newspapers in Education* program, or using video production as a part of the English classroom could be imagined as connected to ASL.

I mentioned to students that there might be ASL grants available for studentteachers that choose to incorporate service learning components into their lesson plans. (One of my student teachers last year applied for such a grant and worked with a teacher in an Upper Peninsula school in which ASL is a required class.) I believe that inviting student teachers to experiment with ASL and funding those experiments are two of the best ways universities can

get the word out to teachers in the local schools.

Although NMU's Teacher Education Advisory Council (TEAC) introduced the concept of ASL to master teachers and university supervisors/methods teachers at its meetings this year, not all teachers in the schools are able to attend professional development meetings or even have the chance to work with student teachers. Getting prospective student teachers excited about ASL is a great way to bridge the informational gap that often occurs between Michigan colleges and the public/private schools in which our students do their practice teaching.

Of course, this lesson plan only represents one of the ways I'm incorporating ASL into my methods classes. I also ask students to visit schools, observing and interacting with students who are writing. By leaving my classroom and going into the "real world," students are engaging in a form of service learning. Furthermore, I try to include ways for my students to get involved with projects related to the teaching of writing, such as donating items or money to local charities that express a need for school-related materials. Students are also encouraged to use writing in their own lives to connect with others in their communities by writing letters to the editor, publishing in local or national journals such as *LAJM*, or by attending conferences sponsored by groups such as MCTE or NCTE.

I designed the lesson plan I describe here because I want my students to get out there and shake things up. After all, in addition to being prospective teachers, they are also our future principals, leaders of our professional organizations, and potential members of the Michigan Department of Education. Incorporating ASL concepts into the methods class is a great way to prepare English Education students to integrate content learning into the authentic communities in which they and their future students will actively and reflectively participate. My hope is that readers of professional journals like *LAJM* will continue to explore the idea of adding Academic Service Learning components to their collection of successful teaching strategies.

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