

## Developing Service-Learning in Developmental Studies

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Though the new and exciting field of service-learning has rapidly expanded to kindergarten through college, very little has been said about the appropriateness of service-learning for developmental studies (pre-college) level students. Since developmental studies courses have in the past been labeled “remedial,” perhaps it has been assumed that these students are not yet ready for the rigors and challenges of service-learning. This is the story of one developmental studies department that has found that, on the contrary, *service-learning is precisely what our students need to help them smooth the sometimes intimidating transition into higher education.*

We have chosen to tell this story together because the development of service-learning in our programs has itself been a process of dialog. Elizabeth Bryer coordinates the Service-Learning and AmeriCorps programs, and Carol Gish works with the Literacy Volunteers program. Implementing service-learning in our department has drawn our programs into closer collaboration. In addition, because we both teach developmental studies writing courses, we share a perspective on service-learning that is influenced by both classroom and administrative experiences. Co-authoring this article gives us the opportunity to continue our dialog on paper.

We have both become involved in service-learning in large part because of the supportive environment of the Developmental Studies department where we work. Under the guidance of Dr. Meredith Machen, the department was founded with a service/activist orientation that assumes that education should help students take leadership roles in their community and change it for the better. Our experiences teaching in developmental studies classrooms have also drawn us to service-learning. When we teach writing, the often challenging life situations of our students repeatedly calls us out of the abstract realm and require us to ground our teaching in the real experiences of our students. What will make writing skills relevant to students who are trying to carve out a little time for academic study in the midst of demanding work and family responsibilities? What can each classroom experience offer them now, to take home today? These are the questions we consider as we seek to engage our students in the new world of higher education. Thus, it has seemed natural to us to include out-of-classroom experience as part of the curriculum.

One of the biggest hurdles any developmental teacher faces is students' fears that they are not capable of “making it” in school. Every teacher of developmental students must be constantly sensitive to the learning histories which students bring with them into the classroom. Our students come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are successful business owners with expensive homes; some are single mothers on welfare; some are recent high school drop-outs who earned their GED's; some are middle-aged or older individuals who

## Service-Learning in the Disciplines

### **Essay Paper (Analytic Summary)**

This paper is a brief report (10 pages) that summarizes your reflections and experiences.

This analytic summary must link your experiences to the academic material covered in the course:

- Has this experience made your sociology course more relevant or interesting?
- Do you maintain the same views as to underlying sources of social problems as you did at the beginning of the semester?
- What solutions do you propose to change society for the better?

In addition, the report must address:

- History and mission of the organization
- Your exact duties and responsibilities
- Major problems faced by the organization (money, staff, policy)
- How did the experience compare to your expectations of it?
- Has this experience changed your view of government or social service agencies?

## Across Disciplinary Boundaries

have not been in a classroom for thirty or more years; some are recent immigrants. Many had previous experiences with school they would rather forget. Despite the fact many developmental students have raised children, held steady jobs, and been responsible members of the community in a variety of other ways, few seem to recognize they have any skills at all when they are placed in pre-college level classes. They start to believe their life experiences and the skills they developed through them don't "count" Their past experiences of academic underachievement weigh heavily on their minds.

Every developmental teacher must constantly be looking for ways to inspire in her students a faith that old patterns of underachievement can be changed and replaced with new patterns of success. Service-learning speaks eloquently to these challenges. First, by asking students to look at what they have to offer instead of what others have to offer them, *service-learning requires that students focus on their strengths*. Secondly, our students are those who dropped out of school, or who did not excel in traditional skill areas. Thus, they are the most likely candidates for service-learning activities which *focus on learning styles and skills not emphasized in traditional education*. Third, by encouraging students to participate in service-learning activities, we allow them *to build a bridge to academics from a work setting that may be more familiar and successful for them*.

Over the last ten years, our department's service orientation has grown from an ideal to an articulated focus that includes *credit courses for volunteer service, a service-learning office, an AmeriCorps program, a Literacy Volunteers program, and curriculum-based service-learning*. The process of integrating service-learning into developmental courses and services began six years ago when Dr. Machen developed a course entitled *Human Development 170--Volunteer Service*. Through *Volunteer Service*, students do 30, 60 or 90 hours of service and receive 1, 2, or 3 credits for their work. There are no class meetings; instead, students work independently on service projects and fulfill other course requirements to receive credit. In those early days, due to lack of funding, there was only limited support and guidance available for these volunteers. Students turned in a log of their volunteer hours and a paper on their experiences at the end of the semester in order to complete the course.

Despite the lack of infrastructure for the course, many volunteer service students succeeded memorably. One researched and designed a plan for a city-wide bus system that was instrumental in getting the city to consider busses that ran on natural gas. Another student, who wished to study physical therapy, placed out of introductory physical therapy courses when she transferred to a 4-year college because of her extensive service work in that field. Another practiced his Spanish skills by translating for native Spanish speakers at the municipal court.

It was these success stories that inspired Dr. Machen to write a grant proposal to the Corporation for National Service in 1994. Santa Fe Community College applied for Learn and Serve/Higher Ed and AmeriCorps funds and received both. With support from the Corporation, we were able to set up a Service-Learning office for the first time and expand the curriculum and support provided to student volunteers. *Volunteer Service* students now keep journals and participate in a number of other reflection opportunities, sign contracts with the agencies with whom they work in which they define their learning objectives, and are evaluated by their agency supervisors at the end of the class. Word-of-mouth and weekly

## Disciplinary Pathways to Service-Learning

notices about the course in the student newspaper have increased enrollment in the course over 100% since the first year of the corporation grant to roughly 50 students a semester.

The added support and reflection available to *Volunteer Service* students has noticeably improved the quality of their experiences. Having a service-learning office means there is a staff person available to call students during the semester to see how their service is going and to help them troubleshoot when problems come up. Often, it is the most challenging circumstances which are the most educational, but without the one-on-one support of service-learning staff, many volunteers prefer to ignore frustrations they are experiencing at their worksite rather than work them through. With support staff on hand, students often have the courage to practice problem-solving and communication skills at their worksites.

Like the *Volunteer Service* course, the AmeriCorps program was designed with developmental students in mind. What Dr. Machen envisioned was a leadership training program in which adults who were once at-risk themselves tutored and mentored at-risk youth at three public schools. We focused our recruitment of 20 part-time AmeriCorps members on students in Developmental Studies. We told applicants concerned about the level of their academic skills not to worry; they did not need college degrees in order to be effective tutors and mentors.

Developmental students were much more difficult to recruit than other more highly skilled community members. Many developmental students have limited financial resources and could not afford to work part-time for a living allowance that comes out to \$5 an hour. Nevertheless, at least one third of the first 40 AmeriCorps members have been students in developmental studies programs.

Through AmeriCorps we have learned much about the power of enlisting students in developmental studies programs to do service work. First of all, we have learned that college students with low English and math skills can be exceptionally effective tutors and mentors. Though these members did not achieve exceptional success in school, the fact that they nevertheless made it to the community college means they are developing resiliency and the skills they need to motivate themselves--skills that they readily model for the children they serve. When one tutor was confronted with helping a child with math problems she herself did not know how to do, she realized that "if I face my own fears about math and ask another tutor for help in front of the kids, maybe they'll understand that it's okay not to know things and that you never really stop learning and needing to ask for help." These mentors naturally identify with their mentees. When introduced to the low-achieving students with whom they will work, they reject any conventional notions that those students are "lazy" or "bad" and immediately concern themselves with how they can help the student learn. What these tutors understand is, as one AmeriCorps member wrote in her journal, "every student wants to do well."

The mentoring relationships that formed in AmeriCorps were as profound for the mentors as they were for the mentees. AmeriCorps members in developmental studies programs were particularly changed by their experience of providing 900 hours of tutoring and mentoring. What we saw these AmeriCorps members experience is a pattern that is

becoming increasingly familiar to us as we recruit more and more of these students to perform service.

When a student who believes he doesn't know anything about writing is asked to tutor a third grader in English, at first he may express fear and doubt that he has anything to teach. He thinks, "I don't understand the difference between an independent and dependent clause, so how can I help a third-grader?" When he is reminded that most third graders are still learning to read and spell and that many who need tutoring don't even speak English, the college student's confidence is increased. He starts to remember what he does know: how to read, how to write a simple book report, how to speak. The tutor begins to focus on the skills that he has to build on. While helping other, younger students develop the confidence and skill they need to succeed, he will develop the skills he needs to succeed himself: the ability to see what's going right in the learning environment instead of what's going wrong, the ability to note even small signs of progress, the ability to believe absolutely that learning will take place even if not at the pace originally expected. He will also see first-hand the factors that endanger the learning process: becoming overwhelmed by the learning tasks at hand, becoming discouraged by mistakes, the fear of failure that can become so powerful that a student resists learning. Seeing these dynamics in another learner teaches the college student much about how learning does and does not happen and resonates powerfully with his own experience in developmental classes. As one AmeriCorps member put it, "The students are my mentors as much as I am theirs."

What we saw with both the improvement of the *Volunteer Service* course and the establishment of the AmeriCorps Program that came with our Corporation grant was that students who might be unexceptional in the classroom could be exceptional at a volunteer site, and that success in the latter could spread to success in the former. By placing these students in situations where they feel powerful and effective, we remind them of the skills they have to build on in a classroom setting. In addition, by requiring that they keep journals and write papers about their service, we allow them to use their strengths as volunteers as bridges to the development of more traditional academic skills. One AmeriCorps member, who had spent 12 years working on an associate's degree, made the dean's list for the first time during her AmeriCorps year of service. She credits the program with making her a stronger student. "It wasn't until AmeriCorps," she said, "that my education made sense."

Now that we have a service-learning office, the department has been able to take what we have learned from the AmeriCorps program and begin to incorporate service-learning directly into other course curricula. Dr. Machen and Elizabeth are promoting the idea of curriculum-based service-learning throughout the college by meeting with instructors and setting up faculty in-service presentations. Along with the Nursing, Education, Human Services, and Business faculty, Developmental Studies teachers and staff have been particularly responsive to service-learning as a pedagogy. The Adult Basic Education program, as part of its five-year goal-setting process, has adopted the goal of integrating service-learning into GED (high school equivalency) courses, with a special focus on service-learning projects for younger students who may not yet be able to take the GED test, but who need to be involved in a stimulating school program that treats them like adults. Adult Basic Education students are also encouraged to engage in volunteer work that helps them

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explore a certain career interest, or to work as tutors or volunteer office staff within the Developmental Studies program. Even though they do not yet have their high school or GED diploma, they can enroll in the volunteer service course and start building college credit.

Curriculum-based service-learning is also becoming a compelling way to encourage the college student body to participate as tutors in the Literacy Volunteers program. Carol is developing a course which combines the developmental studies writing course, *English Review*, with volunteer tutoring of students learning English as a Second Language. Students can earn 1, 2, or 3 additional credits through *Human Development 282--English as a Second Language Tutor Field Experience*.

In this combined course, the focus of the tutoring experience is to empower the *English Review* students as learners. Students will be encouraged to examine their own learning process and consider different learning styles in order to discover the most effective way to tutor their students. By placing students in teaching roles, Carol hopes to help them discover that teachers don't have to know all the answers. Students who view teachers as experts instead of facilitators of learning often have a hard time being active, questioning learners. Breaking out of this pattern will help students become more responsible for their own educational choices.

Because the service agency, Literacy Volunteers, is housed on campus, the logistics of arranging service opportunities will be simplified. *English Review* students will attend a four-part workshop on tutoring techniques. They will be matched with ESL students who are on campus for ESL classes, and who want to put in extra time studying. For the hour before the *English Review* class, the classroom will be turned into a tutoring center where tutors can meet with tutees in a supportive environment where others are doing similar work, and where the instructor is available for guidance. *English Review* papers and journal topics, as well as classroom discussion, will provide a space to discuss and reflect on the tutoring experience.

We have learned that flexibility is key in providing service-learning experiences to students in developmental studies. Most community college students have jobs or children which are understandably higher priorities for them than their classes. The self-paced nature of the *Volunteer Service* class has been ideal for students who want to squeeze in 3 extra credits by volunteering weekends or evenings. At times, however, the self-paced nature of the class has made it hard for student volunteers to see themselves as part of a larger movement on campus of students taking leadership roles in the community. The resulting isolation can sometimes undermine the motivation of volunteers facing particularly challenging situations at work sites. Carol's *English Review/Tutoring Field Experience* class and a new requirement that *Volunteer Service* students attend at least one two-hour reflection session with other volunteers during the semester will address this problem. Following the model of the Praxis Program at TVI in Albuquerque, the *Volunteer Service* reflection sessions will be offered at several points during the semester at varying times.

Curriculum-based service-learning may need to be defined differently in developmental studies than in other departments. Because *Volunteer Service* students can design their own service project and because we do not require that their projects be directly related to their more traditional studies, only about half of the *Volunteer Service* students can

design their own service project and because we do not require that their projects be directly related to their more traditional studies, only about half of the *Volunteer Service* students end up doing “service-learning” projects in the strict sense of the term. It is for this reason the course title “Volunteer Service” was not changed when the Service-Learning Office was established. However, since developmental studies classes require so much confidence, courage and perseverance of students, these issues are an explicit part of developmental studies course curriculum. Every type of volunteer work that enhances these qualities can be seen as an effective teaching tool and therefore tied closely to the developmental studies curriculum. Whatever the correct terms for the work these students are doing, its power to remind them of the skills they have to build on and the achievements they’ve already attained may be just enough to inspire them to persevere in the classrooms where success has, in the past, been more elusive. Even the suggestion that they have skills to offer is enough to give students a completely new way to see themselves, as this student journal so vividly illustrates:

*I don't know if I should really be saying this since I've never actually taught anyone English. Maybe I feel the way I do about it because I feel that I should be more qualified for the task like than what I am now... My family has never really been involved in any type of community service. This could be why I have never considered volunteering myself. I think that it would be nice to give it a try sometime. The biggest obstacle I face in doing this is not being too sure of myself. I suppose that it would all depend on what it is I would be volunteering for. Manual labor would be fine, but teaching someone English or math would make me feel uncomfortable. Teaching English would definitely be a challenge for me. When I stop and think about it, I begin to wonder what it would be like and all of the challenges that it would be composed of. I suppose that it would also be a question of how badly you would like to aid someone. Now that I think of it, maybe it is time to break with tradition and start anew.*

## English as a Second Language Courses

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English as a Second Language and Service-Learning are an obvious pairing. Students in these courses often express a desire to use English in natural, purposeful situations with native speakers, or at least with people who do not share the learner's native language. Three models involving courses on differing skills at various proficiency levels at Glendale Community College, a school of 14,000 in a suburb of Los Angeles, have confirmed the "fit" of Service-Learning to ESL and at the same time revealed the complexities of that fit.

Students in an intermediate speaking/listening course are not yet proficient enough in English to hold jobs, yet they know enough English to communicate in a basic way. Our Volunteer and Service-Learning Center (VSLC) places these students at a local retirement home for one-on-one dialog sessions with a retiree. Before their first session, they practice in class asking questions on appropriate topics. Then, as they visit the retirement home an hour a week for eight weeks, they gather data for class discussions on topics relating to American culture. They also write in journals, discuss in groups their progress and frustrations, and give a reflective oral report at the end of the semester. Although some students are initially reluctant to enter homes for the elderly, final reports focus on friendships, lengthy and meaningful conversations, and gains in vocabulary, listening comprehension and self-confidence in English. They also feel the satisfaction of doing good for others as their new friendships lead to running errands, repairing bookshelves, bringing hot soup, and exchanging gifts.

Jen Sun Shi's journal entry reflects on a first session:

*When I went to "Windsor Manor" last Friday I was very nervous... I thought to converse with old people was not comfortable in any language. However, "Windsor Manor" was warmer, cozier and more beautiful than I had expected... I met Louise... She had a problem on the spinal column. She who was white, tall and had a tough constitution, liked "Scrabble" game.. She taught me how to play it... and I got several new words from the game. She and I really enjoyed playing it. "*

Clearly, intercultural learning accompanies language learning in this project.

In an upper-intermediate course in reading, writing and grammar, success rates have suffered because students lack adequate exposure to English, especially through reading. So students are placed in child development centers. After receiving training by K-12 specialists and a public library children's librarian on selecting books and reading them aloud effectively, students read many books, select a few, practice reading them aloud, then read them to two K-2 children at a time weekly for ten weeks. They write weekly journal entries evaluating the progress of the children and of themselves toward present goals, and they reflect on their experiences in groups during class. After ten weeks, students write on each of various