

# The Campus on the Hill: Diversity at Our Doorstep

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## Abstract:

*In this article, I challenge the assertion that service-learning initiatives reinforce the structures that act to limit socioeconomic mobility. I argue that pedagogies undergirded by composition theory, literacy theory, and reflective practice can assist first-year college students in recognizing 1) inequality in American education; 2) the crucial role of literacy in poverty; and 3) the myths that surround individuals in poverty. Using both narrative and critical sources, I draw upon my decade-long service-learning partnership with an elementary school to emphasize that having students new to the university work with children in a federally-funded afterschool program can be a crucial step toward helping students develop civic consciousness. I posit that critical service-learning, in contrast to traditional service-learning, moves students toward recognizing systems of injustice, an extremely valuable first step in students' journeys toward local and global citizenship.*

## Key Words:

Critical service-learning, service-learning, civic consciousness, social turn, reflective practice.

## Introduction

Service-learning initiatives have become established practice at many institutions of higher education, and common sites include public schools, food banks, homeless shelters, and halfway houses. Practitioners have determined that what distinguishes service-learning from community service is that service-learning is a pedagogical practice with clear learning outcomes and ongoing reflection based on regular interaction within a specific community of need (Jacoby, 1996; Zlotkowski, 2007). Course themes guide learning, and as students move between the classroom and the service site, the curriculum and the experiences in the community begin to meld,

facilitating the students' progress toward becoming reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983; Zivi, 1997). Yet despite generally positive responses to service-learning pedagogies, critics of the practice have asserted that service sites have often been developed within the parameters of firmly established economic, social, and political systems, thereby reinforcing the very structures that act to limit socioeconomic mobility. A primary assertion is that a single-semester class with a service-learning component provides insufficient time for sustained exploration of class structure, race, gender, and power, and therefore may not encourage students to think beyond established hierarchies; without the appropriate tools to reimagine systems of class, college students are unable to develop true critical consciousness (Brown, 2001; Butin, 2005; Cipolle, 2004; Marullo, 1999; Walker, 2000). Yet in a review of service-learning literature, Tania Mitchell (2008) draws a distinction between traditional service-learning and critical service-learning. As she states, critical service-learning involves two significant components: 1) the development of authentic relationships; and 2) working from a perspective of social change. As this essay discusses, even low-stakes service-learning activities, if grounded in theory and reinforced through critical reflective practices, can establish the foundation for civic consciousness in college students (Carney, 2014).

**Context:**

Nashville, Tennessee, is currently experiencing unprecedented growth. Record numbers of people are moving to the area, housing is pricey and in short supply, and historical neighborhoods are being transformed by the construction of upscale high rise condominiums, designer boutiques, and trendy restaurants that have displaced small, family-owned businesses. The rapid gentrification attracts throngs of tourists to the city, who love wandering the redeveloped neighborhoods designed for the ambler seeking experiences that do not include chain restaurants or big-box stores.

Located in the midst of several such neighborhoods is a liberal arts university that has both benefitted from and contributed to the economic growth of the city. Once the site of a plantation, campus tours begin daily at the mansion, which is tended by a docent who carefully maintains its nineteenth century décor. The tour continues on wide, brick-lined sidewalks flanked by greenery and seasonal flora and through gazebos that are remnants of the plantation days. The once-small institution now has a law school, a college of pharmacy, and highly competitive doctoral programs in physical therapy and occupational therapy. Enrollment has grown to almost 8000 students, necessitating the construction in the last five years of classroom buildings, dormitories, and a cafeteria that is three times the size of the previous space. Manicured lawns, gardens, and curving drives soften the hard architectural features, and the newest buildings sit above street level and are bathed after dark in the warm glow of strategically-placed lighting.

But just blocks away from the fresh, clean, and well-lighted lies a different world. Here, narrow streets are made even narrower by cars parked everywhere—on both sides of the street, in driveways, and in yards. In one block, a huge dumpster has sat in the street for months, spilling varied manner of detritus over its sides. A recreational vehicle that has been parked for a very long time overshadows another block. Some homes are small and neat, but most are in need of paint, sport dangerously leaning

carports, or appear to have been abandoned. Other blocks are crowded with large subsidized housing developments, and a high-rise complex for the elderly occupies one entire corner, directly opposite an elementary school. Originally a high school, the elementary school was designated as a math and science elementary magnet school in the 1990s. The old school was subsequently torn down and replaced with a new building that drew students primarily from the surrounding subsidized housing, but also from other areas of Nashville as a condition of its magnet designation.

The elementary school is where, for over a decade, my first year writing students participated in service-learning. Throughout the course of their first semester on campus, they spent one hour a week working with children in a federally-subsidized afterschool program, assisting them with homework and reading with them. Primarily white, middle-class, traditional-age students who have been reared carefully and educated well, they were a stark contrast to their young homework partners (we called them “buddies”), who were almost all African American and resided in the low income housing that surrounds the elementary school. Most of my students’ life experiences have taken place in communities, classrooms, neighborhoods, and churches full of people with backgrounds similar to their own. For some of them, exposure to poverty has taken the form of mission trips to desperately poor sections of other countries—an extremely valuable experience, but one that tends to reinforce the deep current of belief that Americans are immune to such poverty. They know that economic inequities exist in the United States, but because their lives have been so insular, they seldom recognize the magnitude of the gap between the middle-class and the impoverished. Nor have they had any experience with the hard realities of the other side of that gap, such as a cold house in winter or not enough to eat. Fresh out of high school and products of relatively safe lives, they have been firmly indoctrinated with the belief that all Americans share equal opportunity—any American who wants to succeed can, if he or she only tries hard enough.

The opportunity to examine this deeply-embedded belief was one of my primary reasons for establishing a partnership with the elementary school. Assigned a single child that they worked with every week, my students were encouraged to act as positive role models for the buddies, to talk with them about how they felt about school, and to answer their questions about college. With this arrangement, the buddies received a weekly hour of one-on-one attention, and most were eager to tell their new college friends all about their lives. My students soon found that their buddies sometimes lived in non-traditional settings—their primary caregiver may be a grandparent, or they lived in a mixed household made up of cousins, uncles, and step-siblings. Some had parents in jail or relatives who died young as a result of violence. The stories my students shared in class and wrote about in their reflective responses made it clear that for many of them, it was the first time they had developed a personal relationship with an individual whose lifestyle included crime, violence, poverty, and disrupted families. In early reflective responses, students often included comments about how intelligent and curious their buddies were, or they made references to how the buddies reminded them of themselves at that age (most of the buddies were second and third graders). As Tania Mitchell points out, however, students need to be guided to look beyond similarities; otherwise, they may miss “the implications of systemic inequities and may even blame the individuals for their circumstances” (para. 6). Writing becomes the

conduit “through which students make the connections between what they learn in the classroom” (Carney 82) and the activities they engage in at the service site: as the semester moved on, evidence of discomfort emerged in my students’ writing as they found out that these children faced circumstances that they themselves knew of only through movies and television. The perception of America as a vast nation of equal opportunity became tempered with students’ dawning recognition that they had been exposed to only a narrow view of the sociocultural array that constitutes the United States.

## Composition Theory

As a compositionist, my pedagogical choices are guided by theory. My theoretical basis, no matter what class I teach, is built upon what is known as the “social turn,” a movement in Composition Studies in the 1980s that signaled a shift from regarding writing as a process—a definitive series of steps common to all writers—and toward writing as a cultural activity, meaning writers inhabit an “ideological arena” that constantly shifts, requiring that writers reposition themselves in relationship to “their own and others’ subjectivities, discourses, practices, and institutions” (Trimbur, 1994, p. 109). Few composition theorists apply the goals of the social turn to writing instruction with the clarity of James Berlin (1987) in *Rhetoric and Reality*, commenting on the future of writing instruction in higher education:

...writing courses are not designed exclusively to prepare students for the workplace, although they certainly must do that. Writing courses prepare students for citizenship in a democracy, for assuming their political responsibilities, whether as leaders or simply as active participants. Writing courses also enable students to learn something about themselves, about the often-unstated assumptions on which their lives are built. In short, the writing course empowers students as it advises in ways to experience themselves, others, and the material conditions of their existence—in methods of ordering and making sense of these relationships. (p. 189)

Almost twenty years later, Berlin’s description of what the writing course should do for students still resonates powerfully with many compositionists because it so clearly articulates a core belief that undergirds pedagogy: what we write cannot be separated from who we are. Those of us who return to the writing classroom year after year do so because we believe writing is one of the primary ways in which students learn about themselves, become empowered by those discoveries, and take steps toward recognizing their places as citizens in a democracy. All writing builds toward these goals; but reflective writing, a key component of critical service-learning courses, is an especially powerful means of guiding students toward self-awareness. According to Edward Zlotkowski (2007), guided reflection is the primary factor that distinguishes service-learning from community service: service-learning “produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to the course material through reflection activities such as directed writing, small group discussions, and class presentations” (p. 222). If students do not engage in the process of reflection through writing, they may never come to an understanding of how their beliefs and attitudes may be shifting as they work with marginalized populations. Similarly, without the feedback from students,

professors may be unaware of the manner in which theory and practice intersect for their students and the way in which service-learning shapes pedagogy.

## Literacy Theory

The service-learning partnership between the two institutions was originally established out of a desire to increase literacy opportunities for the elementary school children; and while that remained a primary goal throughout the ten-plus years of the partnership, myriad important interactions occurred that were not necessarily related to traditional definitions of “literacy enhancement.” According to Deborah Brandt in *Literacy in American Lives*, literacy is a commodity, a resource that has been carefully manipulated and controlled by ‘literacy sponsors’: “agents...who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (p. 19). My students could have read Brandt and as a class, we could have examined her assertion that “despite ostensible democracy in public education, access to literacy and its rewards continue to flow disproportionately to the children of the already educated and the already affluent” (Brandt, 2001, p. 197). But as they came to know the buddies and wrote about their experiences during tutor sessions, they made discoveries on their own about the distribution of literacy. Being physically present in an urban school, getting to know the children who attend that school and the people who work there, and finding out the details of their buddies’ lives made it clear to my students that while many Americans do have an abundance of opportunity, “others have to figure out how to make a running leap across the hole in their histories left by generations of economic injustice” (Brandt, 1999, p.13). They began to understand that pursuing literacy cannot be taken for granted: as with other staples of life, acquiring literacy “remains an active, often daunting process for individuals and families” (Brandt, 2001, p. 1).

Civic consciousness was further enhanced by assigned readings, including *A Hope in the Unseen*, which details the experiences of Cedric Jennings at Ballou High School in Washington, D.C., one of the poorest high schools in the United States. The product of a single mother and an imprisoned father, Jennings makes it from Ballou to Brown University; but the particulars of his journey, narrated by Ron Suskind, a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, make clear the many obstacles Jennings must overcome. Initially, students read Jennings’s story as affirmation of their belief that anyone can attain the American Dream of attendance at an Ivy League university if he or she tries hard enough. During class discussion, however, we focused on examination of the numerous points at which Jennings could have given in to his circumstances and abandoned his quest for higher education. Suskind skillfully balances Jennings’s extraordinary drive to climb out of poverty with the very human side of him, that part of him that at times wants to give up, to cease struggling to rise out of poverty in a system that operates by rules established by middle- and upper-class white people. Other provocative readings include Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary*, an autobiographical account of Rose’s struggle to make it to the university, a setting for which his working-class background did not prepare him; and selections from bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress*, particularly the sections in which she discusses the specific cultural differences that influenced her educational experiences from elementary school to the university level. But perhaps the most stunning realizations came to my students when we viewed

*Waiting for Superman*, a documentary that highlights the extraordinarily high dropout rates in many of our poorest high schools, and that draws attention to the true randomness of the opportunity for a good education through lottery systems implemented in many cities. Theory and practice became indistinguishable as the students came to understand that literacy acquisition is crucial to achieving the “traditional” American goals of financial and familial security, and that the good educations they received were by no means available to all American children.

In the classroom, according to Mitchell (2008), “critical service-learning experiences look to knowledge from community members, the curriculum, and the students themselves” (p. 57). As students read, write, and work with their buddies at the service site, they move among the linkages of power, knowledge, and identity (Butin 2005), a process that encourages them to examine the socioeconomic forces that have shaped their own lives and perhaps most significantly, to recognize that the roots of poverty are deep and complicated. Before landing in my class, almost none of my students had spent sustained time with a child from a different socioeconomic and racial background in the child’s own school; and those who had most likely had not been asked to reflect in writing on their experiences in these communities. It is the cycle of tutoring, reading, and reflecting that brings students ever-closer to an understanding of the socioeconomic implications of literacy acquisition as it elides the line dividing pedagogy and theory. But the most important element of the service-learning experience may well be the opportunity for self-analysis provided by the required reflective writing component. According to Pat Belanoff in “Silence: Reflection, Literacy, Learning, and Teaching” (2001), Americans lead extremely hectic lives that leave almost no opportunity for quiet contemplation. Accustomed to constant activity, we may feel uneasy with the spaces of silence and have little idea what to do with such spaces; so we fill them by turning to cell phones, televisions, and computers. Talking on the telephone and surfing the internet are not activities that should be avoided; indeed, we are a wired society and we need to be technologically savvy. However, we also need opportunities for quiet contemplation and chances to explore the nagging questions that lurk at the edges of our consciousness and nudge at us at three in the morning. Many of us never acquire the necessary tools for productive self-scrutiny because we have never been exposed to them.

According to Belanoff, reflective writing actually shapes experience: “who we are and how we have understood ourselves as the result of moments of reflection determine what a particular experience is” (p. 415). Writing about experiences provides an opportunity to examine conflicting feelings, complex emotions, and deeply embedded attitudes in a manner that extends beyond simply thinking about an issue. It is not uncommon for service-learning experiences to leave students unsettled and confused. Accustomed to consistent confirmation of particular beliefs and attitudes, students may find that service-learning activities disrupt deeply-held beliefs they bring with them to the university. But if students are not being asked to work at the ragged edges of their beliefs, the university is not doing its job: encouraging students to examine firmly entrenched beliefs about themselves, attitudes toward other races and social groups, and their responsibilities as citizens are primary goals of higher education and are often articulated in a university’s mission statement. Belanoff (2001) concurs and posits reflection as vital to this process: “reflection often grows out of discomfort,

even though it may afford delight and thrive in mystery and paradox. Educational settings have to create some level of dis-ease, some disruption of student and teacher expectations” (p. 420). For students new to the university, this “dis-ease” may stem from sources other than just the classroom. During that challenging first year, a composition class may be the only place in which students are encouraged to examine complicated feelings and emotions through writing. A critical component of any service-learning experience, reflection can also guide students toward an understanding of writing as an activity “which can sustain them as human beings” (Watson, 2000, p. 90). The disruption of deeply-held beliefs happens throughout our lives, and the inclusion of assignments focusing upon reflection legitimizes the practice of writing as a tool that can help individuals understand what they are experiencing and why.

## Theoretical Implications

According to William Zebroski in *Thinking Through Theory*, “Theory is not the opposite of practice; theory is not even a supplement to practice. Theory is practice, a practice of a particular kind, and practice is always theoretical” (p. 15). Whether or not compositionists have a clearly-articulated theory of writing, they always teach from a theoretical basis. The service-learning experience serves to make real to students what can only be theoretical if they never leave the classroom—America is not a just place, resources are not divided up equally, and being intelligent and curious will not assure that individuals can successfully navigate the path of academic achievement. The personal relationships that developed between the university students and the elementary school children enhanced the students’ sense of civic responsibility and ongoing commitment to making a difference primarily because they came to know, and subsequently to care, about the children. As Berlin states, of course the goal of the composition classroom must be to provide students with the necessary skills to succeed in the workplace. Yet increasingly, universities craft mission statements designed to address the whole student, to prepare students not just for the workplace, but to become contributing, productive, independent thinkers who acknowledge their responsibilities as members of a global community—individuals who are equipped to problem-solve, who know how to function as members of a team, and who recognize the resources available to them to make the best use of their own talents. Service-learning offers rich opportunities for bringing together the goals of professors, the writing community, and the university.

## Conclusions

My students’ reflective writing indicated that they cared about their buddies and worried about the children’s home lives, their treatment in the classroom, and whether or not they were receiving the services and/or attention the children deserved. They expressed concern that they were not doing enough for their buddies, sought advice on how to make their tutoring sessions more meaningful, and took personal responsibility when sessions did not go well. By semester’s end, I began to see evidence that, as budding adults, they recognized that citizenship carries responsibilities. As one young man stated, “I am thankful for my time with my buddy, because he gave me a reality check that was greatly needed. He not only made me thankful for what I have, but for who I have. Throughout my [tutoring] experience, I have become much more aware of

myself...as part of a community.” The inclusion of a weekly hour with the children asked my students to step briefly outside their lives as university students; and the reflective writing they produced allowed me access to the thoughts of caring, concerned young people who worry about larger issues than their behavior sometimes suggests. At the end of a semester with the buddies, my students had come to share with me a deep concern about the futures of the children at the elementary school; as one student wrote, “I realized that I was probably one of the very few college-educated mentors that Keisha had in her life. Suddenly, my once a week tutoring sessions became increasingly imperative.” Before the partnership with the elementary school, reading and discussion failed to move my students beyond the steadfast belief that “anyone” can do what Jennings, Rose, and hooks did. We had to move outside the classroom walls before I could witness my own theories evolving into practice, before I could nudge my students toward considering their responsibilities as civic-minded citizens.

Critics of service-learning point out that due to the time constraints of a semester, traditional service-learning practices pay insufficient attention to systems of inequality; students leave such classes with little understanding of the power structures that shackle people in poverty. Yet forming a relationship with a child who lives in poverty is an extremely powerful first step. As Donahue and Mitchell (2010) state, “Students with racially privileged identities...might see racism only in egregious acts of prejudice rather than in structures that confer racial privilege” (sec. 2). The students who congregate at the campus on the hill are intelligent, thoughtful, and capable young people, but without opportunities to develop relationships with members of the communities that lie at the base of the hill, they may never move beyond cliché-bound perspectives. The roots of civic consciousness were planted with every trip to the elementary school and were nurtured by pedagogical practices grounded in composition theory, literacy theory, and reflective practice. As one young woman wrote: “Tutoring has truly changed me...and has allowed me to re-examine my entire direction in life. I feel that I am part of something much bigger than myself, and I have a greater sense of community than ever before.” Assisting students in challenging their assumptions about power and privilege is a crucial component of higher education, and low-stakes service-learning activities are a valuable way for students to become a part of the conversations so vital to social change.

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