

Collecting Our Selves: An Interdisciplinary Service-Learning Project

Introduction

My interest in service-learning began with my desire to address two problems at my place of employment, the SUNY Institute of Technology (SUNYIT) in Utica, NY. One was an apparent lack of connection to both the campus and the outlying community felt by freshmen students who had come to a campus that, until quite recently, had been populated only by transfer students coming in at the upper division level. While our campus may have served transfer students well enough, new freshmen were often defeated by the isolation they felt because the school provided little else beyond classes. The other factor that influenced my decision was my own professional desire to do something that might benefit my students beyond introducing them to the types of writing they would be expected to do throughout the rest of their college careers. I had been teaching English composition at various levels for ten years and was looking for ways beyond textbook adoption to “shake things up” a bit.

This three-semester service-learning project was an interdisciplinary effort between Freshman Composition classes, two upper division Psychology classes, and the After Breast Cancer support group in Utica, NY. Psychology students used narratives collected through interviews with members of the support group to practice case study and resiliency theory analysis. Students in composition classes began the course with a paper that combined narration, description, and reflection to recall a medical event from the past and how it altered them. For their final papers, students reflected on the experience of interviewing breast cancer survivors to determine the survivors’ resilient traits and come to a conclusion about the value of illness narratives for speakers and listeners. The project has resulted in an anthology of thirteen

narratives titled *Voices of Resilience: Breast Cancer Narratives from the Mohawk Valley*. One thousand copies of the book will be given away free of charge to newly diagnosed cancer patients throughout the area.

Finding a Project

This service-learning project was an example of cross-discipline collaboration. My colleague Dr. Joanne Joseph has worked with the After Breast Cancer support group in Utica, NY for many years, giving support in the form of speaking engagements and group discussion. Participants had talked about publishing a collection of group members' narratives of experiences with the disease, but had never been able to. I went to a meeting, introduced myself to the group, proposed that students collect their narratives through interviews, and waited for group members to sign up. I learned immediately that many breast cancer survivors believe in the power of their own narratives and want to use narrative to educate others.

This aspect of the project was no surprise to me. I had done research on the value of narrative therapy for a doctoral paper. I had learned that through narrative therapy, in which clients identify trauma through the metaphor of a story, they can work toward an altered and more positive identity. Creating one's own narrative leads, in turn, to the possibility of multiple revisions, and clients can move toward a desired identity by revising and revisioning those narratives over time.

In their book *Narrative Theory in Practice: The Archaeology of Hope*, Monk, Winslade, Crocket, and Epston tell us how using narrative in therapy can "invite clients to begin a journey of co-exploration in search of talents and abilities that are hidden or veiled by a life problem" (3). Narrative therapy involves selection and reinterpretation of events as clients are encouraged to

revise their stories into positive and enduring ones that provide hope for future successes. Monk et al. tell us that “A counselor using narrative ideas is interested in restorying a client’s early life to demonstrate that the abilities currently being used to deal with the problem at hand are built on capability accumulated from when the client was very young” (20). Rather than dealing with proscriptive and/or negative behaviors, clients can find a positive orientation based on past success that will, in turn, lead to further success. So in narrative therapy one’s story does not end; rather, it remains as evidence of the possibility of positive change and empowerment.

Learning About Service Learning

Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Gyles Jr. tell us that “service-learning aims to connect the personal and intellectual, to help students acquire knowledge that is useful in understanding the world, build critical thinking capacities, and perhaps lead to fundamental questions about learning and about society and to a commitment to improve both” (Eyler and Giles, 1999, 14). By exposing students to the real lives of others in the community, they can understand that learning occurs in all kinds of situations.

To discuss the value of service-learning in composition classes Thomas Dean’s book *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning In Composition* is especially helpful. Deans tells us that “if the general inclination of members of the discipline is to theorize about writing as a social act, then service-learning is one means by which to underscore and extend this commitment” (9). Much of what composition teachers do socializes writing, from whole group discussions of topic generation, to thesis refinement, to peer review.

Deans categorizes service-learning into three types: writing for the community, writing about the community, and writing with the community. He tells us that “the options for writing about the community are almost without limit, ranging from the personal/affective to the

social/analytical—as well as, which is perhaps more important, all the generative possibilities for combining diverse ways of knowing” (104). For this project composition students were compelled to combine primary research with more theoretical sources for their final papers, so personal narratives became part of their research for the final paper as they wrote about the interviews and reflected on what they had gained from them.

Composition students wrote “about” the community of women they met from the After Breast Cancer support group after interviewing them in small groups of two and three. In order to write successful papers they had to generate interview notes that could be used accurately not only when they wanted to reflect on the stories themselves, but when they wanted to talk about a theory of resilience and come to some conclusion about the value of the illness narratives they had seen and heard.

Navigating the Real World of IRBs and HIPAA

In order to realize the goal of a published anthology, all participants needed to be aware that the narratives would ultimately be available to the public. Dr. Joseph and I met with the Institutional Research Board of the Comprehensive Breast Care Center at Faxton Hospital in Utica, NY to discuss the project and guarantee that there would be no risks to respondents. Consent forms that began with a purpose statement and detailed the progression of the project were constructed.

In addition, students signed statements that detailed the confidential nature of the project and specified what the information they gathered could and could not be used for. For example, students agreed to “share information and narratives obtained from the breast cancer survivors with members of their class,” but could not “disclose any information obtained in the interview

with breast cancer survivors with any person outside the class.” The forms used in this project complied with The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA).

Structuring the Courses and Assignments

At SUNYIT, freshman composition students are overwhelmingly traditional-aged and mostly male. I was therefore proposing a service learning project about breast cancer with mostly eighteen-year-old males. I knew from the start of this project that its success would rely on my enthusiasm and my ability to create a classroom where students felt it safe to communicate openly. I decided to use the broad topic of the service-learning project, illness and recovery, for the first and final paper assignments.

Structuring a composition class to include service learning proved relatively easy. I decided to introduce the concept of illness by using a narration/reflection/description paper to ask students to describe an encounter with illness, either theirs or someone else's, which had some effect on them. We talked in class about how we often remember those times when serious illness or injury jars our physical and emotional worlds quite vividly. Students responded especially well to the idea that some memories seem especially vivid because they are attached to significant events surrounding illness.

When grading those first papers, I was amazed that so many students wrote about health problems that they themselves had experienced. Their ability to describe the places in which health events occurred was impressive. Students remembered clearly the smells, sounds and appearances of doctors' offices and hospitals. They reflected on changes they'd undergone as they came to understand themselves differently when they or a loved one had exposure to medically-mediated illnesses. I could see in those first papers that students were responding to

how different and unsettling the world of medicine can be. Many wrote about feeling alone, even when surrounded by their families and friends. Reading my students' papers made me realize that they had a good deal of understanding about what it meant to enter a community in which their status was uncertain, and I felt that they would be receptive to talking to others about similar experiences.

In his piece "Whose Paper Is This, Anyway? Why Most Students Don't Embrace the Writing They Do for Writing Classes" Michael Dubson proposes that college composition instructors would do well to remember something very important about students' attitude toward writing. He tells us that "writing is personal, emotional, visceral" and goes on to point out that "No student comes in with a failing grade from another course and says, 'I got an F on *my* math' or 'I got an F on *my* history'. But they do say 'I got an F on *my* paper, on *my* writing'" (Sullivan and Tinberg 97). In other words, when students write they recognize ownership of the writing their college teachers ask them to do. Writing is personal in ways that some other academic engagements are not because each writing assignment requires the generation of new knowledge.

In her article "Stories Can Save: A Defense of Narrative Writing" Mary Nicolini asserts "In our increasingly disposable, transient society the function of memory sometimes is ignored. We are convinced we'll never forget watershed moments: we store our epiphanies in our consciousness. Yet, memory is selective. We do forget" (Nicolini, 1994, 60). Even things that seem so vivid when they occur because they have significant impact on our lives are not fully recallable later on, so it's important to leave a narrative behind to stand in for writers when they can no longer occupy the same emotional space they once did. After reading Dubson's and Nicolini's words, I was convinced that writing narrative could be more than just a starting point in the composition process; it could become an important object of study.

I used the same sequence of events for three sections of Freshman Composition. Students' exposure to the After Breast Cancer group began in the last third of the semester, when the group's founder, Karen Christensen, came to class to talk about its origins and growth. Students were clearly impressed by the nature of the group and the many (over 800) people it serves. They learned that while meetings are held once a month, in a rural area like central New York many in outlining areas are served through a newsletter the group makes available through the Faxton Hospital Comprehensive Breast Care Center in Utica, NY. The group is in its sixteenth year of service to breast cancer patients.

My colleague, Dr. Joanne Joseph, also visited each class and talked about a model of resiliency adapted from her book *The Resilient Child: Preparing Today's Youth for Tomorrow's World*. Joseph uses the model in classes and to talk to various groups about how people respond to adversity and illness. The model contains categories attributed to those considered resilient. Joseph identifies resilient persons as those who have a proactive approach to situations in general, who are both challenge-oriented and goal-oriented, who are prosocial in nature, and who recognize some higher order philosophy. Within the aforementioned categories are clearly identifiable traits. For example, a belief in a higher order philosophy may correspond to a spiritual belief, to family pride, to a patriotic belief, or to any belief or philosophy that enables the believer to view something beyond him/herself as important.

Joseph also showed the class the film *Harlem Diary: Nine Voices of Resilience*, which chronicles the lives of a group of inner-city youths who talk about the circumstances in which they live and their hopes for the future. Students could easily identify specific traits of resiliency as they watched young people in Harlem working to establish support groups to demonstrate actively by creating memorials and dramatic presentations that address violence in their

neighborhoods. Students recognized Joseph's and my commitment and enthusiasm for the project, and each class responded positively to the collaboration between professionals with such diverse backgrounds.

Interview questions were very important to the development of this project. In the composition class, students learned the difference between open and close-ended questions, and they developed examples of each in small groups. They then refined the questions and talked about concerns such as how much information should be elicited by any one question. Students in the psychology class also generated interview questions. Although the students were at different levels educationally, the questions generated by both groups were very similar. Students wanted to begin the interviews by asking interviewees some personal information about themselves. They wanted to know where interviewees were born, where they had grown up, their birth order, schooling, job histories and present living situations. After interviewees gave some initial background information, they were asked questions specific to their illness. The questions were:

- When were you diagnosed?
- What do you remember the most about your initial diagnosis? How did you feel?
- What did you do to deal with the diagnosis?
- Was anybody particularly helpful? Please tell us about that person or persons.
- What kinds of obstacles did you face and what did you do about them?
- Did anything positive result from your having breast cancer?
- What have been your major challenges since your initial diagnosis?
- What advice would you give someone facing breast cancer?
- Based on your experience with breast cancer, what advice can you give us?
- Did anything from your past experiences help you deal with breast cancer?

Because the process of constructing interview questions was so important to the composition class, I repeated it with subsequent classes. Constructing questions was a way for students to anticipate what the interviews would be like; they felt that doing so gave them an idea of how illness can be viewed as both a positive and negative experience.

The final composition assignment was a synthesis paper in which students reflected on what the interviewees' stories meant to them as listeners to come to a conclusion about the value of illness narratives and how those narratives connected to resilience. To discuss illness narrative, many students chose to work with the article "Making Sense of Illness Narratives: Braiding Theory, Practice and the Embodied Life" by Kaethe Weingarten. Weingarten's discussion of her own experience centers on the similarities and contrasts between her illness, breast cancer, and her daughter's illness, Beckwith-Wiedemann Syndrome. Composition students found Weingarten's information easily accessible, perhaps because she is clear about the purpose of her article from the onset, saying "Anything that helps put illness in its place, that allows us to feel we are who we are, despite it, is welcome. For me, classification schemes have given me a perch outside my illness narrative, to look at it. Rather than feeling trapped inside of it, I have felt curious about it" (Weingarten, 2001, 1). Weingarten then uses Arthur Frank's distinctions of restitution, chaos and quest narratives to categorize types of illness narratives.

Composition students had already written classification papers, so they had practiced generating and organizing information in ways similar to what Weingarten proposes. They found the categories easy to understand and used them to categorize differences they perceived as they reflected on the interviewees' illness narratives. Having such a straightforward classification system helped students find ways to articulate the experience of the interviews

beyond describing what was said. The respondents' anecdotes became the evidence for assertions about the nature of resiliency and the value of illness narratives.

When each round of interviews was done, students first reflected in informal (ungraded) writing about what they had found most surprising about the encounter. Then I asked students to reflect on one characteristic of resiliency that they had observed in one respondent to help them see the connection between the theoretical and the more concrete. Finally, they again wrote informally and discussed how their chosen article about illness narrative could be applied to the interviews to come to a conclusion about the value of illness narratives. Many students found that meeting and interviewing breast cancer survivors made them reflect on their own lives, and many expressed a changing view about what they consider important. Several wrote about how their own fears about coming to college seemed less daunting after the interviews.

A typical synthesis paper requires students read essays or research pieces about a topic or aspects of a topic and then come to a conclusion about how the ideas therein fit together, but this paper assignment was different. For this synthesis paper, students had to go beyond narrating the respondents' stories to reflect on their experience with the interviewees. The conclusions they generated from that reflection had to be connected to the resiliency theory, and they also had to try to demonstrate an understanding of any correlation between Weingarten's experiences and those of the respondents. Having "real" evidence from the interviews reduced the abstraction level of the paper's components, and it elevated the value of the interviews, as they were seen as an important part of the research and exploration of the topic.

One student wrote:

So why do these people take the time out of their schedules to share their stories with us? Because in its own way, it's therapeutic. Medicine and science can only do so much to better the body, but telling their stories is a way of bettering their minds, emotions, and spirit. These people fought against the odds and proved the doubters wrong. . . . Stories help the narrator and audience in different ways. The story helped Julie, the narrator, because she showed through her expressions that she was very proud of her accomplishments. As she tells her story, she can remind herself of how far she has gone in her recovery and that she can continue to improve herself in the future. I was also affected by Julie's story. When you get a first person point of view, you can better understand how to help people in these types of situations.

Another added:

Meeting the women in the ABC group gave me an incredible understanding of what these women were actually faced with when dealing with an illness. My whole view on illness has been affected by this short visit just by hearing a few short stories. It's hard to imagine that women that were faced with a life threatening illness can be so positive and humorous about the situation.

These typical examples indicate that the student recognized the value of interviewing the respondent and learning about illness narratives.

Psychology students learned about the conventions of constructing case studies and how to present them to an audience in their field. They used the resilience model to identify traits and apply them to the case studies they had generated from interviews. Details from the interviews became the evidence students used to support either the presence or absence of resilience. This application of theory was the basis for their final papers. Their task was different in that they weren't called upon to reflect personally on or evaluate the experience, but

they gained practical experience using interviewing and writing in ways that contributed to their professionalization.

Converting Interviews to Essays

Editing began when twelve interviews were collected, so in effect my work began when my students' work ended. After the interviews were converted verbatim into a written format, my job was to convert transcripts to coherent essays. I soon learned to expect many directional changes in narration as participants told events out of order and then went back to add new information. Because the audience for this book is newly diagnosed breast cancer patients, I felt it important to include specific information about cancer treatments and the interviewees' specific responses to them, as well as their responses to the emotional experience of being diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer.

This project is drawing to a close and the book will soon go to a local publisher with the title *Voices of Resilience: Breast Cancer Narratives from the Mohawk Valley*. Funding for the project was awarded by the Utica, NY chapter of the group Golfing for Breast Cancer. SUNYIT has committed to funding a publication party, to which members of the ABC group, community members, faculty and all of the student-participants will be invited.

Conclusion

I knew that the interview part of the project was going to be a success by the way students responded to the interviewees. Follow up discussion revealed that students had felt some nervousness, but when they met the interviewees their trepidation diminished because the interviewees displayed so much humor and optimism. Students from all three classes expressed surprise at how vigorous, healthy, and optimistic interviewees were. I can honestly say that my

concerns about gender proved unfounded, I speculate because students were engrossed in a dynamic interview process, in their active and alert listening, and in making connections between what the interviewees were talking about and their own personal and family experiences. Beyond asking questions, students in each class talked about what loved ones had encountered when facing serious illness. In fact, one male student concluded his paper with the following words:

At first I did think it would be awkward doing the interviews and having the narratives presented to us. However, those feelings soon dissipated once the first narrative began. I do believe I benefited from their narratives. Seeing how two people can overcome the hardships of cancer is inspiring. Should I ever be diagnosed with cancer I would now wholeheartedly say I'll be better prepared for dealing with the illness? Cristine and Lynne's resiliency demonstrated in their illness narratives will be something I'll remember.

In order to determine whether composition students could identify any lasting impact the project had on their attitude toward the class and its assigned writing, I conducted a brief, five-question survey asking them about the experience almost two years after the first service-learning section was completed. One of my former students responded:

The service-learning project added a level of seriousness and meaning to the atmosphere of the class. In some classes, you do work that is important and helps to develop skills in respective fields, but the work seems to be trivial in its nature. With the service learning project, there appeared to be a deeper purpose and sense of meaning toward the work I did. There was an importance to the story, outside of getting a grade or learning a certain type of technique.

Another former student wrote:

The project, overall, had a positive effect on my attitude towards the course work for the class. It is my opinion that many writing assignments fall victim to a sense of disconnection between myself and what I am supposed to be writing about. The service learning project, however, was quite different from anything else I have done for any writing class. Unlike a lot of assignments I have had in the past which had me reading an article that I did not know much of anything about and trying to summarize or critically analyze that article, the service learning project actually had me engaged in an interaction between other people, which I thought was fantastic. Being able to directly "interview" and listen to the two women who came in to speak to our class automatically created a closer connection to what I was writing about. Whether I was interested in the topic or not became irrelevant when the person(s) I was writing about had been standing right in front of me. Personally, I tend to gravitate towards and excel at things that are more person-oriented, and the service learning project was certainly conducive to that. I would have liked to have done more of that type of project during my course work. As for the effect the project had on my writing, I would argue that writing about something you are more interested in naturally draws out more from the writer and probably helps improve writing skills. I felt that, like other writing assignments, my writing improved at the very least just by having more practice.

I include the comments in their entirety because they illustrate what Eyler and Giles talk about as the importance of the personal connection to learning. They assert that "one of the facets of service-learning that excites students is the quality of the interpersonal experiences that occur in the community compared with their usual classroom work" (Eyler and Giles, 23). Both students clearly felt that interaction was important to their learning, that the personal connection they felt to the respondents made the experience different and memorable.

In order to be successful, a service-learning project like this one has to be taken on with the idea that open communication and time for reflection is important. Students need to feel

comfortable talking about their concerns, and they need time to reflect on what they are being asked to do in their written responses. When primary research in the form of personal interview is included in a synthetic paper, students need such time in the form of reflective classroom discussion and informal writing opportunities to help them come to conclusions and see connections between abstract theoretical ideas and the words of the respondents with whom they interact.

The final phase of this project was to meet with the respondents again to update them on the project and to verify facts in the final versions of their narratives. Without exception, respondents spoke positively about the experience with SUNYIT students and reiterated their commitment to the importance of the project and to seeing their narratives in print. We proposed the books' title and enlisted their opinions about cover design. They were especially pleased that the book will be made available free of charge and that their words will serve to ease some of the overwhelming feelings someone else might have when faced with a breast cancer diagnosis. Whether this project will lead to more civic engagement on the part of students remains to be seen, but I feel that service-learning was an important way of connecting students to the world outside of the classroom, and I look forward to our next project.

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