



Decolonizing Knowledge through Service-Learning in Higher Education: From Local to Global

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Rooted in classical rhetoric, first-year English Composition courses typically required of most students in most American universities embed the theory and practice of writing into many disciplines within the curriculum. At Immaculata University and West Chester University, undergraduates are required to complete two fourteen-week semesters of English Composition. In the fall semester, the Composition curriculum focuses on a range of genres, such as Profiles, Evaluations, and Critiques, which focus on genre mastery and critical thinking but do not necessarily require scholarly research. The main learning outcome in the first course is to transition the students from high school composition expectations to the standards of academic discourse applicable to diverse disciplines. Therefore, while the Composition sequence is taught by faculty in the English department, we are cognizant of the critical thinking requirements applicable to diverse disciplines to meet the needs of students in all of our undergraduate majors. The second semester course in the Composition sequence typically is devoted to scholarly research methods, again designed to be applicable to multiple disciplines. Therefore, we require students to write on topics that can be analyzed through myriad disciplinary lenses. For example, we might focus on a social issue, such as homelessness, and during our discussion of shared readings on the topic, we would investigate the issue through the perspective of economists, health care professionals, lawyers, and others to discern how the facts about homelessness are filtered and conditioned through the disciplinary lens. The goal of such methods is to model real-life situations for writing that involve diverse perspectives and audiences, thus moving writing beyond the classroom to train students for rhetorical sophistication in “real-world” writing situations.



Pursuant to these rhetorical and curricular goals, one increasingly prominent methodology in the teaching of English Composition is “[service-learning](#)”: an experiential learning approach in which students “experience social/political problems and procedures for solving them....get involved, participate in real matters, develop responsibility, and critically reflect upon their authentic experiences” (Koopman in Berry & Chisholm, 1999, p. 81). The connection between service-learning and the rhetoric-based English Composition course emerges from the role of rhetoric in classical times. “You learn citizenship by seeing the connections you have to the community,” as Herzberg (2003) explained: “The ability to talk coherently and persuasively about civic affairs was precisely what rhetoric meant. What it meant to be an educated person, from the time of the Greeks and Romans, was to be articulate and to be concerned about public welfare.”

Much research about the scope of student learning and development based on service-learning experiences has pointed to the enhanced experience for students engaged in International Service-Learning (ISL). Bringle and Hatcher (2011), for example, noted that a “structured academic experience in another country” offers students the opportunity to:

...(a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; (b) learn from direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others; and (c) reflect on the experience in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a deeper understanding of the global and intercultural issues, a broader appreciation of the host country and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, locally and globally. (p. 19)

Studies comparing the high-impact learning potential of domestic service-learning versus international service learning, however, are less prevalent. Niehaus and Crain (2013) examined a range of studies to highlight the limited and sometimes contradictory conclusions about domestic and international service-learning. They note that

[w]hile the studies by Marmon (2007) and Ferrence and Bell (2004) point to the potential for domestic service-learning experiences to be just as profound and transformative as ISL, others have argued that international experiences are



fundamentally different. Kraft (2002) argued that the physical travel and cultural and language competencies necessitated by ISL amplify the cross-cultural learning that takes place abroad relative to domestic programs with a cross-cultural component. (p. 32)

Niehaus and Crain likewise conclude that findings from a study by Couper (2001) “point to the potential for international experience to provide greater cognitive dissonance for students than domestic experiences” (p. 32).

We are accustomed to thinking of the world in terms of boundaries; we regularly engage, consciously or unconsciously, with the influence of news media highlighting exoticism and disasters, in colonializing attitudes toward “other” countries. What if we turned our reflection about world conditions toward the conditions of our own closer neighbors? Service-learning across international boundaries seeks to de-colonize our thinking by engaging with the international “other.” But the domestic “other,” the poor and food-insecure who are the others in our own local communities—if we look to see and understand, we find that domestic service-learning is as powerful a de-colonizer of our thought as ISL. Truly global thinking, rightly applied in our own neighborhoods, de-colonizes the local as well as the international.

The current study investigates the potential for student engagement domestically as a precursor to international service learning. Our students are well-aware of hunger, for example, on a global scale since they see news reports, advertisements and direct-mail appeals for monetary assistance. However, such awareness remains abstract, filtered through media. Therefore, the opportunity to travel internationally would deepen students’ understanding of such an issue. But since many students are unable to afford the cost of ISL, the ISL option exists only for the more economically stable or most affluent demographic of students. The desire to participate in meaningful service-learning projects that draw on the cognitive dissonance of experiencing economic and cultural differences should not be limited by the individual economic status of our students. We believe we may muster culturally meaningful domestic service-learning as a precursor to ISL. Once the seed of service is planted, we encourage global outreach based on the more advanced disciplinary study students encounter in the third or fourth years toward the baccalaureate degree; for example, a student in a Latin American



History course could take a spring break research and service-learning trip to Lima or Callao, Peru, engaging first-hand with systemic issues of poverty rooted in history and manifested in current social conditions. To prepare for such ISL experiences, therefore, we sought to provide opportunities for students to discover first-hand the reality of a largely invisible social problem in the USA—“food insecurity.” This phrase was coined by the United States Department of Health and Human Services in 2006 in lieu of the word “hunger.” This phrase softens the impression of hunger in the USA while accurately focusing on conditions of the working poor, folks who are not in constant danger of starvation but do not always earn enough money to provide meals for their families throughout each month.

One critique of some approaches to service-learning is that the service activity can be paternalistic, a colonial enterprise giving students a sense of power in doing work for those who are socially or culturally distant “others,” whereas the ideal service-learning experience should lead students to work with individuals in a sense of mutually beneficial community (Ward and Wolf-Wendell, 2000). Such a colonizing, paternalistic attitude may be especially likely when the service activity is performed in an international context: those who speak a different language, in a different political and social system, are more likely to be seen and judged negatively from a baseline of home assumptions. But given the social differences that exist in the economically diverse society of the United States, and the relative isolation of one economic class from another, domestic service-learning, not just ISL, may elicit cognitive dissonance and may be a useful initial way to decolonize knowledge about others. A nation should, after all, be a civic community in which citizens work together for mutual benefit—as in the best service-learning projects.

While students are aware of hunger globally, albeit not first-hand, many are unaware of a growing problem in the United States—food insecurity. When one thinks of social problems in the USA, food is likely not even in the top ten; or food is considered as a problem opposite from food insecurity: excessive eating and the problem of obesity. Unlike global hunger, food insecurity in the USA is not advertised or broadcast on the news. However, the number of food insecure households is growing nationally, primarily because of the prevalence of minimum-wage employment and the



high bar for government assistance eligibility. McMillan (2014) reported that the number of food insecure people in the United States increased to “48 million by 2012—a fivefold jump since the 1960s, including an increase of 57 percent since the 1990s” (p. 73). This increase is not limited to urban areas, as many (including our students) assume. Rather, food insecurity has spread to the (ostensibly middle-class) suburbs, and even to rural areas where agriculture is prominent. The primary influence on this growth of food insecure households is the government threshold for minimum wage--\$7.25 per hour—which amounts to an annual salary of \$15,080 if the position is full-time, 40 hours a week (Center for Poverty Research, 2013). Many positions are just short of full-time since employers must provide health benefits for full-time employees; employers avoid paying for health benefits by keeping the employment hours below forty. In single-family households, the salary is stretched thin, since in addition to other costs of living, the parent must pay for child care, which is not covered by state benefits. The government poverty level rate is likewise woefully low for the cost of living reality, as the chart below indicates:

2016 POVERTY GUIDELINES FOR THE 48 CONTIGUOUS STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	
PERSONS IN FAMILY/HOUSEHOLD	POVERTY GUIDELINE
For families/households with more than 8 persons, add \$4,160 for each additional person.	
1	\$11,880
2	16,020
3	20,160
4	24,300



2016 POVERTY GUIDELINES FOR THE 48 CONTIGUOUS STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	
PERSONS IN FAMILY/HOUSEHOLD	POVERTY GUIDELINE
5	28,440
6	32,580
7	36,730
8	40,890

Source: U. S. Department of Health and Human Services

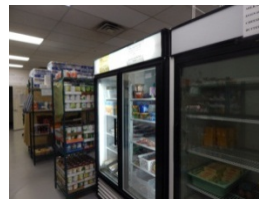
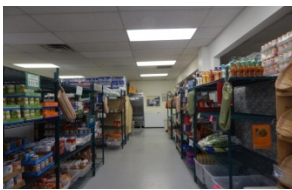
U. S. federal antipoverty programs using the guidelines (or percentage multiples of the guidelines — for instance, 125 percent or 185 percent of the guidelines) in determining eligibility include the Head Start early education program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the National School Lunch Program, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, and the Children’s Health Insurance Program.

Because the people in need are “invisible,” students’ encounters with the reality of domestic food insecurity create moments of cognitive dissonance and the concomitant high-impact learning. In mostly-affluent West Chester, Pennsylvania, the per capita household income was \$43,873 in 2013, the most recent year for data (West Chester). Yet the number of food banks and pantries in Chester County (where West Chester is located) is twenty-nine. Therefore, the need for supplemental food per month is widespread.

Case Study:



Students gained understanding of the systemic problem of food insecurity by volunteer service at the West Chester Food Cupboard (WCFC), in spring 2015 and 2016. The [WCFC](#) serves residents of the West Chester area only. Once a month, clients may visit the Cupboard to supplement their food. The Cupboard's layout is like a small grocery store, which allows clients to select items from among fresh produce, frozen meats, canned goods, and even hygiene products. The Cupboard's philosophy is that the inherent dignity of our neighbors must be upheld; therefore, the program allows for client choice rather than some other operations which provide pre-packaged boxes of food, the same for everyone in need.



The service enriched students' understanding of the written research on this issue. As is common with such a high-impact activity, students' expectations were dispelled after the first visit. Before the visits, the students commonly assumed that the people who need the WCFC services were substance abusers or unemployed. What they discovered was that the folks in need are not distinguishable from others who are not food insecure; Cupboard clients are mostly hard working people with families that they cannot support on low monthly wages. Many are single parents, while a significant number are elderly.

Student Reflections:

- The service is helping me think more critically by the situation that I am in where I could ask for money to get food to eat every day or even go in the refrigerator to get something to eat. But the people in need can't just walk in a kitchen to find food; they have to work hard to gather some scraps sometimes and sometimes people in need don't eat for some days. This service is helping me improve my ways of deciphering my wants and needs.(Kyle)
- My expectations are: seeing the staff helping their clients in a kind and friendly manner. As far as the "demographics" go for what kind of clients we



will see, I am sure they are regular everyday people, but they are people that need a little bit of extra help making ends meet. This opportunity will help me think more critically about social justice and issues of poverty because I will be exposed to it, first hand. Seeing it on TV, or reading about poverty in the newspaper is different from seeing it and experiencing the effects of it first-hand. (Katelyn)

- Going to the Cupboard tonight made me realize many things! At first I was nervous, but the interaction with the people made everything go well. I feel good knowing that people who cannot provide for their families, or families who cannot afford to buy certain things, are being helped. I found this opportunity to be a wonderful experience. It really opened my eyes to see that not everyone can live under the same circumstances, or need what wealthy people can afford. It gave me a new perspective on how sometimes I idolize things without stopping to think that there are people who actually need help and that I should instead help them and be thankful for what I have. I hope to return and help more knowing that helping others makes me feel better about myself. (Ariana)
- Another way I had not expected to serve the community through this class was by spreading awareness of the growing issue of food insecurity in the United States. Throughout the course I learned about food production, food insecurity, wages and many other factors that can contribute to poverty. Each paper our class wrote or article we analyzed, we gained a greater knowledge on the subject. By March, I found myself telling my friends and family all about food insecurity and poverty in America; these are topics I had never even considered until taking this course. The Empty Bowls Event we hosted was yet another act of service in more ways than one. While collecting money to sustain the West Chester Food Cupboard, we were spreading awareness of the issue of Food Insecurity in the United States. (Erin)
- Because I was sitting at a table [at the Empty Bowls event], I was able to hear the reaction of a family and their young daughter. They would say things like, “Oh, there’s no way 48 million families are living off of food stamps,” or “50



million families living in poverty seems a bit high.” When I heard their responses I realized Americans are actually very naïve to the severity of food insecurity in the country. Because there is no knowledge of the problem, people are less likely to strive to make a difference. I think we did a big thing informing the community about food insecurity in America. (Lydia)

- I was not sure what to expect from this course considering I have never been in a service-learning class. I expected to go out and do things like clean trash off of the roads or feed people at a soup kitchen. I thought that the community service component would be completely separate from the composition part, and I was in for a complete surprise. From the first day of class, I began to understand that everything I did in and out of the classroom was related. (Mamako)

The effects of service-learning in English Composition, as experienced by the above-quoted students, are typical, as documented national research confirms. For instance, as Kendrick and Suarez (2003) noted, on “nine measures of civic engagement and social responsibility,” students completing service-learning composition courses were, at statistically significant levels, “more likely to serve others in need.... work on behalf of social justice” and understood “the role of external forces as shapers of the individual” with more tolerance for “diversity and multicultural sensitivity.”

Ultimately, then, the application, in an English Composition course, of a service-learning methodology that examines an issue like hunger in the local community or nation is the first step in decolonizing knowledge by unsettling the sense of alienation from the others among us: those others whom we and our students may ignore due to difference across the boundaries of race, class, condition of life, security of employment, degree of social privilege, and neighborhood. Students like those whose reflection excerpts appear in this essay, and all of their student colleagues, come to understand that easy assumptions about those objectified others, abetted by preconceived notions about race and class difference, must be questioned, and that such questioning and reflection reveals a more complicated and complete knowledge of, even identification with, others. What was previously ignored or unknown becomes content for critical reflection and writing; what was previously invisible becomes visible



and real. The next step in decolonizing knowledge is to apply the same lesson in critical understanding across additional boundaries: the boundaries of nations, of continents and peoples. In either case, a service-learning approach to English Composition, or to other writing courses, provides a useful pedagogical vehicle for the critical thinking necessary to decolonizing knowledge, through the practice of rhetorical perspective and the articulation of reflective thought in writing. As Mignolo (2007) notes, “When the languages and categories begin to be activated in order to build a world in which many worlds co-exist, by social actors aiming at de-colonization of knowledge...the splendors of human imagination and creativity will open up” (p. 450).



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