Overview and Methodology

Service learning encourages and enables students to think of the social problems that surround them. Through service, students develop solutions to these problems and become a part of the growing global community. Service learning pedagogy is fairly new to the English department, and over the past ten years scholarship about service learning pedagogy has increased. In 1998, scholars approached the Modern Language Association (MLA) with a proposal for a service learning panel. However, the MLA was reluctant to endorse service learning because English was “grappling to redefine itself in the face of employment, cutbacks, over reliance on part-time labor, and pressure for accountability from students, administrators, and legislators” (Cushman “Service Learning 204). Since no one at the MLA knew about service learning and they were concerned with protecting the status of the English department, the panel was denied (Cushman “Sustainable”). The reluctance of the MLA to acknowledge this new pedagogy, however, did not discourage professionals from using service learning in their classrooms or producing scholarly research. Instead, committed service learning professionals turned to CCCC as the forum for service learning pedagogy discussions. Now, professors and institutions integrate experiential learning into the curriculum through service learning. Further, service learning helps the English department validate its existence; students who participate in service show that the English department can provide a service to the community.

Proponents of service learning use different methodologies to help their students complete successful service projects. The most common method, journals, link writing to service. These journals help students reflect about the service they perform, but if journals are the only writing used in a service classroom it limits student observation and knowledge only to personal reflection and testimony (Cushman “Sustainable” 47). The journals are most effective when they are used in conjunction with case studies, ethnographies, and teacher-research. These objective writings illustrate the scholarly research produced in conjunction with service projects. Students may produce their own case studies to help them become familiar with academic writing. For instance, during a service project aimed toward increasing child literacy, students take specific notes about how the participants react and change. Afterwards, these notes are used during class discussion to help the professor and students understand the problems faced by the community (Cushman “Public Intellectual” 330-31). In addition to journals, case studies, and ethnographies, students may write a paper at the end of the semester proposing solutions to one of the social problems they encountered during their service.

Ideas and Themes

Many advocates of service learning believe that it is necessary for the teacher to be at the service site during the students’ service. Professors who are on site during the service project act as supervisors or researchers. When professors participate in activist research, the crux of service learning is supported. Professors who produce research that is similar to student research show the students that their research is also important. Institutionally, this emphasis on research in the community develops a relationship between the university and the community. Activist research creates a dialogue between the helpers and the helped, and this dialogue allows the helped to better understand what the helpers are learning about them (Cushman “Public Intellectual” 332). If the two groups converse with one another and information is generated and freely shared, then
the solutions and thus, the progress, which can result from such service is made more evident and more likely.

The idea of service learning in the classroom is widespread. Tutoring is the most popular form of service learning, especially in composition classrooms, because it allows the tutor and the tutee to build a good relationship (Schutz and Gere 132, 135). When the student tutors someone in the community, they build this type of trusting relationship. Then, they are able to talk to that person about societal problems, such as homelessness, illiteracy, and drug and alcohol abuse. Students discover what causes these problems and how they can be fixed. When students interact with people who live with these conditions, the information gained is used in the student’s own research. For example, students can participate in research which shows the connection between homelessness and illiteracy. Further, if the professor participates in the service as a researcher, student research may also be used by the professor.

The relationship between researcher (student/professor) and the people for whom they students provide a service can be symbiotic. However, the symbiotic relationship between those tutoring and those being tutored is not always as healthy or helpful as many people imagine. Unfortunately, students may believe that they are “liberal saviors” because they see the people that they are helping as those who are not part of the dominant culture and need their help in order to succeed (Schutz and Gere 133, Himley 421, emphasis mine). If a student believes they are better than those they are helping, the relationship is no longer beneficial to either party. Not only does the relationship become destructive because the student feels they are granting the tutee a privilege, but the relationship can become manipulative because the person being served knows the student needs their cooperation to complete the project and uses it to his or her advantage (Himley 424). When either the student or the community member feels manipulated, then the service can no longer produce the desired effects. Instead, both parties come away from the service with hardened stereotypes. These stereotypes include the ideas that people who are need of help are in the position of need because they want to be, and that people who help others do so to make them feel good about themselves.

Even though the limitations and disadvantages of service learning are severe and harsh, the advantages, the information, and the life skills obtained by students usually outweighs these disadvantages. Service learning students gain a better understanding of the world around them, and they are introduced to cultures with which they may have not been familiar. The students also gain life skills because they have “practice in the global vision, intercultural communication, and the management of diversity—skills that produce ‘global nomads as a highly skilled workforce whose ability to move across places, and between languages and culture’” (Ahmed qtd. in Himley 432). The people for whom the service is being done are not the only benefactors in service learning. After completing a course with a service learning component, students can better react to the world and see ways to help the people in it.

**Terms**

**Activist Research**—Research done by the instructor or professor of the class that completes service learning activities. This research helps the professor to stay connected with the community and understand what its most severe problems are. The research then enables community leaders to discuss these social problems.

**Service Learning**—A pedagogy that introduces students to the community to do service. Service learning concentrates on connecting the classroom instruction to the service performed in
the community. Students reflect on the service to make the connection between the community and classroom.

Writing-about-the-community — Students participate in “general” or traditional community service, and then the students write about the community for class assignments. This type of writing encourages the students to concentrate “reflection, social analysis, and/or cultural critique. Professors who wish to discuss academic and critical literacy often use “writing-about-the-community approaches in their classroom (Deans 18, Deans’ emphasis).

Writing-for-the-community — Students perform work for non-profit organizations. During the work at the service site, students develop a client relationship with the agency. This type of writing supports the introduction and development of “workplace literacies” where students learn about genres produced in the workplace (Deans 16, 18, Deans’ emphasis).

Writing-with-the-community — Students work with individuals in the community where they “research and address pressing local problems.” When students write with the community they participate in “academic, community, and even hybrid” literacies that allow them to better communicate with all parties involved in the research (Deans 18, Deans’ emphasis). This type of writing is conducive to professors who wish to participate in activist research.

Scholars

Ellen Cushman (Michigan State University, Research Interests: Critical and Institutional Literacies, Multimedia Literacies, Rhetoric and Composition, Critical Pedagogy, Service Learning)

Linda Flower (Carnegie Mellon University, Research Interests: Cognitive Rhetoric)

Anne Ruggles Gere (University of Michigan, Research Interests: Composition Theory, Rhetorical Theory, Pedagogy)

Bruce Herzberg (Bentley College, Research Interests: Service Learning and the History of Rhetoric)

Assignment (Journal + End of the Semester Paper)  
Students in a composition class are responsible for completing twenty hours of service at the local Asian Community Center. The center offers adult ELL classes for Asian immigrants. Ideally, the students in the composition class will assist the ELL teacher with classroom activities by working individually or in small groups with the immigrants. After each session, students must reflect on the ELL class. They should consider how their immigrant partner is learning a new language, what their partners consider most important to learn, why they are learning a new language, and how they communicate their desires to the students. The students complete this reflection by writing in a journal. At the end of the semester, the students will use their reflections along with scholarly research to complete a paper. Possible topics include how immigrants learn a new language or how language acquisition affects their adaptation to new cultures.
Annotated Bibliography

Cushman, Ellen. “The Public Intellectual, Service Learning, and Activist Research.” 
*College English* 61.3 (Jan 1999): 328-336.

This article shows readers why research and continuous participation in the community benefit not only the community but also the service learning program. Cushman places an onus on the professors and instructors who provide students with service learning opportunities to move beyond the institution of academia. When the professors and instructors move beyond academia and participate in what Cushman calls “activist research,” they will be able to help the community in which they are serving. More importantly, service learning classes must concern themselves with the most pressing problems in the community or the service is not pertinent to the community itself. Instead, the activity completed serves only the students. The article also discusses some limitations of the service learning pedagogy.


Ellen Cushman outlines how service learning became popular within the English department and service learning’s role within the department. Most importantly, she discusses the idea that English must begin to be a program and discipline that can show it provides a “service” to the community because so many people feel that English departments do not contribute outside of academia. Furthermore, she emphasizes that when students participate in service learning activities, they are able to gain an understanding of societal and cultural problems which plague their communities. Through an understanding of these problems, students who work in the community begin to develop plausible solutions. The students then work with community members in strengthening the community.


Cushman discusses how professors, instructors, and colleges and universities can implement a successful service learning program and insure its continued existence even when the people who first created the program move to different positions. Thus, these institutions create “sustainable” programs. To create an ongoing and successful program, the university must be continually involved with the service project. According to Cushman, it is important that instructors and professors teaching service learning classes “view the community site as a place where their research, teaching, and service contribute to community needs and students’ learning” (41). When this idea of service site and student learning contribute meaningfully to one another, the program will be sustainable.

This book provides instructors, professors, and students with a basic overview of service learning in the academic community. Deans discusses how service learning can be used in composition classes, what types of writing projects, literacies, and identities are formed by when a service learning pedagogy is used in a composition classroom. To aid people who are developing service learning programs chapters 3-5 are case studies of specific service learning classes. Each of the chapters discusses one of three writing methods: writing-about-the-community, writing-for-the-community, and writing-with-the-community. The case studies discuss how the class used service in and out of the classroom. Further, one of the appendices provides descriptions of service learning programs from around the country.


Norma Greco discusses a service learning project performed by high school students at The Ellis School in Pittsburgh. Like many other authors who discuss service learning, Greco believes that these students, through their service, were able to achieve a better understanding of the world around them because they interacted with it. She contends that when students participate in service learning projects, they interact with the world with a more mature and comprehensive attitude toward the social problems which other people face. The service project provides facilitated interaction in community settings that the students may not be familiar with, but through this experience the students gain self confidence, decision making and critical thinking skills, and problem solving techniques.


Bruce Herzberg discusses how service learning and the activities that students participate in while doing service provide them with a “social conscience.” However, Herzberg devotes most of the article to discussing the limitations in service learning pedagogy because of the ways that students understand the social problems that they come in contact with. These limitations (student responses are too personal, students do not understand the societal factors that cause the social problems, and students do not think critically about ways to solve these social problems) can only be combated by successful teaching. Only when the professor or instructor teaching the course demands that students think about the social issues on a more broad spectrum will the benefits of service learning be introduced to the classroom.


Margaret Himley discusses the types of service learning opportunities that exist for students; for instance, the service learning activity provides service to the students by giving them more opportunities to write, students serve the community by tutoring community members, or students work “for” the community by writing brochures, pamphlets, and newsletters for non-profit organizations. However, for Himley, “dominant discourses of community service learning rely too much on the figuring of the stranger or those who don’t belong (yet) to mainstream American life” (421). Himley believes that when students, in service learning classes, are only
introduced to community members as “the other” or “the stranger,” then these students perpetuate the belief that they have more power than those they are serving. Instead of this student versus community member power relationship, Himley advocates for a “collaboration or partnerships” where both the student and community benefit from the service.

Schutz, Aaron and Anne Ruggles Gere. “Service-Learning and English Studies.” *College English* 60.2 (February 1998): 129-149.

Aaron Schutz and Anne Ruggles Gere provide readers a basic overview of what service learning programs are. They discuss the importance of service learning to composition classes noting that service learning helps students realize how texts are produced and understood by writers and readers. The authors provide ideas for service projects, and they explain the importance that tutoring plays in many service learning projects that are located in composition classrooms. Further, Schutz and Gere stress the integration of service into the classroom setting and vice versa.