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A Letter-Writing Campaign: Linking Academic Success and Civic Engagement

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A Letter-Writing Campaign: Linking Academic Success and Civic Engagement

Regina A. Rochford and Susan Hock

Abstract

The goals of this project were to a) engage two classes of developmental writing students in a service-learning project to support the preservation of an on-campus historical site, and b) improve students' scores on the ACT Writing Sample Assessment (WSA) exam. After touring the historical site, each advanced developmental writing student tutored a beginning English as a second language (ESL) learner as he/she drafted a letter. By advising the ESL students as they composed and modified their letters, the advanced writers contemplated, discussed, and improved their own skills, so that they were able to achieve passing scores on the WSA, which requires students to write persuasive letters. Moreover, through this project, the instructors effectively linked the academic study of rhetoric with community service by assisting Queensborough Community College and a historical society in preserving an important site and by helping students comprehend their role as valued citizens of the college community.

Introduction

How can two professors meaningfully incorporate service-learning into developmental writing courses whose students are predominantly full-time, low-income, community college students who work as many as 40 hours a week and have little time to spare? Moreover, how can a service-learning project assist in improving students' scores on the WSA? These were the challenges encountered when two writing professors decided to integrate service-learning into two developmental writing classes.

In 2007, approximately 52 percent of incoming freshmen were placed in developmental writing courses after they failed to obtain the minimum score of 7 required to pass the WSA (Queensborough Community College Fact Book, 2008). Worse, after completing developmental writing courses, only 45.7 percent of the native speakers of English

and 34.8 percent of the ESL learners achieved passing scores on the test.

Many academics have suggested that developmental students experience difficulty passing the WSA because they lack experience in composing persuasive letters in authentic situations (Deans, 2000). Moreover, although these students are instructed in this form of discourse before taking the ACT, they believe the practice topics and the test prompts are artificial and disconnected from their lives. Therefore, in an attempt to develop both a sense of civic responsibility and improve student achievement, we engaged their students in a service-learning project that required learners to write persuasive letters to gain the first level of landmark status for a noted historical site on campus.

Service-Learning and Developmental Writers

Service-learning is a teaching philosophy that integrates meaningful community work with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2005). According to Kraemer (2005), developmental writing instructors who engage in service-learning often assert that this pedagogy prepares students for leadership roles in their careers and communities. It also assists them in seeing their assignments as publicly viewed acts, instead of mere pedantic writing assignments, because the students are writing for real audiences rather than just their instructors. In addition, composition students place more value on service-learning writing activities because they are more purposeful and consequential (Deans, 2000).

Course-based service-learning programs are more effective among writing students, especially when students can readily connect their service-learning activity to the course content (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee,

2000). Most important, service-learning has resulted in improved academic outcomes in critical thinking, grade point averages (GPAs), and writing skills (Astin et al.; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993). Prentice (2009) reported a higher rate of retention among developmental reading and writing students who participated in service-learning activities. Astin et al. also asserted that these results occur because the learners receive more emotional support from faculty and engage in more student-to-student discussion.

When first-year developmental reading and writing students at Queensborough Community College took part in a variety of short-term service-learning experiences, their GPAs and rates of retention increased, and they acquired significantly more college credits (Rochford, in press). This occurs because service-learning enhances the freshman experience by drawing students together to form a community of learners in which social, academic, and community integration occur (Stavrianopoulos, 2008). Furthermore, McCarthy (1996) reported that although one-time or short-term service-learning experiences may be limited, they provide a balance of challenge and support for students and can result in perceptual and attitudinal changes among participants. Stavrianopoulos also indicated that incoming freshmen who participated in a service-learning program were more engaged in their educational process and even energized by their involvement. Her study demonstrated that the integration of academic content and community service created a sense of connectedness between classroom learning and personal lives by transforming passive, rote classroom exercises into active engagement so that the students discovered the link between real life experiences and classroom learning. Kincaid and Sotiriou (2004) discovered that when first year composition students mentored intermediate ESL writers, both groups reported (a) an improvement in their basic writing skills, (b) a greater need to attend to details in their own writing, and (c) more willingness to scrutinize their work to make the corrections necessary for a polished product. We had these research experiences in mind when we decided to integrate service-learning into two writing courses.

The Service-Learning Assignment

Goals of the Service-Learning Experience

The purpose of this project was three fold. The first goal was to initiate a letter-writing campaign for the Queens Historical Society to obtain a Queensmark for the Oakland building, a historical site on the campus of the Queensborough Community College of the City University of New York.. The second goal was to provide beginning ESL students with additional individualized tutoring as they learned to compose and organize basic compositions. The third goal was to enhance the writing skills of the advanced developmental writers to help them pass the WSA.

Historical Significance of the Oakland Building

In 1645, the Dutch governor of New Netherlands granted John Hicks one of the first grants to assume ownership of the land on which the Oakland building was erected years later. In 1845, this parcel was passed down to the Lawrence family, who built the Oaks Mansion. It is believed that the name "Oakland" was derived from the name of this mansion. In 1859, John Taylor cultivated the property into a horticultural enterprise. However, after his death, his son developed the Oakland Golf Course, a private country club that maintained very exclusive membership that included prominent wealthy New Yorkers such as Bernard Baruch, H.F. du Pont, and Frederick Steinway. In the early 1920s, the Oakland building was constructed as a clubhouse for this elite golf course. In 1952, the golf course became a public facility. In the early 1960s, to alleviate overcrowding in local schools, the City of New York purchased the golf course so that Queensborough Community College, Benjamin Cardozo High School, and Public School 203 could be built. The Oakland building is the college's oldest structure. It sits on a hilltop overlooking the entire campus. It currently houses a modern museum and contains works by many contemporary artists, although the structure still retains many of its original 1920s architectural features, all of which are enjoyed by the college and surrounding communities (*The Oakland Golf Club: A History*, 2008).

The Oakland Service-Learning Experience

This service-learning project was implemented in two developmental writing classes. One class consisted of learners from an advanced developmental composition course for native speakers of English, while the other class contained beginning ESL composition students. The students were first introduced to this project when the Queens Historical Society executive director visited their classes and provided a lecture and literature about the history of the Oakland building. The purpose of this session was to explain the historical significance of the Oakland building in the preservation of Queens and the role of the Queens Historical Society in this community. After the executive director provided an overview, she distributed brochures and documents for the students to read and discuss. The literature included: (a) *The Oakland Golf Club: A History* (2008); (b) *The Landmark Process* (2008), which specifies the requirements for landmark status in New York City; (c) a Request for Evaluation (1999), a form completed when an organization applies for landmark status; and (d) applications for the Students' Preservation Council of Queens. This council permits students to join an advisory committee that works in conjunction with the Queens Historical Society to determine if buildings in Queens County merit the distinction of a Queensmark due to their outstanding architectural, cultural, or historical significance.

During the in-class presentation, the ESL students were quiet and made few inquiries. However, when the instructors and their students stood outside the Oakland building to compare its exterior to the old pictures in the literature, the students began to enthusiastically discuss their observations.

After they entered the building, the students were immediately impressed by the beautiful interior and the art exhibits in the lobby. At this point, the curator appeared and escorted the group through the entire facility. As he explained the exhibits and the history of each room with interesting anecdotes, he also shared photographs of the interior as it had appeared over the past 90 years. By the end of the tour, both the students and teachers were captivated by this historical structure and the rich history it brought to a modern community

college campus filled with functional buildings. After the tour ended and the students were free to leave, many remained in and around the building discussing its charm and trying to comprehend why it had not yet received any form of landmark status. Clearly, the students were excited about participating in this letter-writing campaign.

After the tour, each advanced composition student was assigned an ESL tutee and was required to coach this pupil in composing a persuasive letter to support the preservation of the Oakland building through a Queensmark. Both the ESL and advanced writers were informed that each letter should include: (a) a clear introduction that specified the main idea; (b) two body paragraphs that began with topic sentences and contained appropriate and accurate supporting details; (c) a conclusion; and (d) accurate spelling, grammar, and transition words. This activity obligated the advanced composition students to: (a) verify that a suitable introduction was provided; (b) recommend corrections to body paragraphs that lacked clear topic sentences; (c) clarify why certain supporting details were inappropriate, insufficient, or redundant; (d) suggest how to develop thoughts; and (e) correct any sentences that obscured meaning.

Although the first two tutoring sessions occurred during class time, the remaining sessions were conducted in the Basic Skills Learning Center so that both groups of students could request the guidance of a trained tutor or the use of a computer. In addition, the students maintained reflection journals in which they expressed their thoughts about the project as it progressed throughout the semester.

After the advanced writing students completed several tutoring sessions and their ESL tutees submitted their letters, the advanced learners were then instructed to compose their own letters, which required three body paragraphs instead of two and more elaborate supporting details. Through advising the ESL students as they drafted and modified their letters, the advanced developmental students would contemplate, discuss, and improve their own writing skills. This process would increase the likelihood that they would pass the WSA, which requires students to write organized, well-developed, persuasive letters. In addition,

through this project, the instructors effectively linked the academic study of writing with community service by assisting the college and the Queens Historical Society in preserving an important historical site and by helping students comprehend their role as citizens of the college community.

Thus, this service-learning project moved developmental writing students out of the classroom and engaged them in: (a) the observation of an authentic historical site; (b) a genuine letter-writing campaign during which they corresponded with real audiences; (c) civic participation and responsibility; and (d) reflection about their individual learning experiences.

Discussion of the Results

Since this project produced many positive results, this section will discuss each of these findings individually. Although some statistically verifiable results were achieved, many of the more subtle outcomes were gleaned from teacher observations, as well as from the students' and instructors' reflection journals.

Academic Achievement

When the semester began, the advanced developmental writing students exhibited extremely weak writing skills, especially in producing supporting details. However, as a result of reading, analyzing, and interpreting information from the Queens Historical Society and tutoring their ESL partners, they became adept at creating lengthy, well-organized paragraphs containing an average of 10 sentences. As experienced writing instructors will attest, it is unusual for so many weak writers to make such progress in one semester. It appears these skills transferred to their other writing activities because these students earned a mean WSA score of 7.07, a passing score.

In fact, 67 percent of this class scored a passing rate, considerably higher than the average college passing rate of 45.7 percent. The project also appears to have had an indirect effect on the advanced writing students' ACT Reading Compass scores, as they achieved a mean score of 76.68, in contrast to the nonparticipants' mean of 74 (Rochford, in press). Clearly, these scores reflect remarkable progress, and they corroborate the findings of Kincaid and Sotiriou

(2004), Astin et al., and Markus, Howard, and King (1993), who reported academic improvements among students who took part in service-learning activities.

In addition, after the advanced composition students worked with their ESL tutees and discussed relevant information to be included in the ESL learners' letters, the advanced writers discovered even more information to incorporate into their own persuasive letters. Moreover, because the entry-level ESL students had limited lexical ability, the advanced composition students were required to point out and correct vocabulary issues. As a result of this discourse, the advanced composition writers reported being more cognizant of their own lexical limitations, and thereby improved their vocabulary, too.

Throughout this project, the advanced writers indicated a recurring concern: How could they be expected to assist the ESL students when their own writing ability was so inadequate? However, at midterm, the advanced developmental students provided their instructor with positive feedback when they revealed that working with the ESL students had heightened their awareness of their own deficiencies so that they had become more skilled at revising their letters. These findings are consistent with those of Kincaid and Sotiriou (2004), who reported improvements in basic writing skills when English composition students tutored ESL students. In the future, it is suggested that the advanced writers use their reflection journals to record some of the writing issues they have identified and corrected by tutoring ESL students.

The advanced developmental writing students also revealed how much they admired the work ethic of the ESL students. Both instructors reasoned that the ESL learners' positive attitude and diligence permeated the learners in the advanced writing class and ultimately cultivated improvements in the native speakers' attitude toward their writing. Consequently, this experience proved to be a great motivator for the advanced developmental writers, and it supports the findings of McCarthy (1996), who indicated that short-term service-learning experiences can generate an improvement in students' attitudes.

Lastly, at the end of the semester, the

advanced developmental students also learned how to post their letters on the college's E-Portfolio system. Many students asserted that this activity was a useful organizational tool because it provided the opportunity to re-read their letters and engage in reflection, an essential ingredient of service-learning. Most important, it gave each student the chance to take ownership of his/her hard work.

When the advanced developmental writers first began to tutor their ESL partners, the instructors repeatedly heard the tutors informing their ESL tutees that they hadn't included topic sentences. This feedback was anticipated inasmuch as beginning ESL writers often experience difficulty crafting topic sentences in learning to draft body paragraphs. However, after the ESL students submitted their letters, every letter contained well-written, clear, topic sentences. Likewise, the ESL students in the service-learning class continued to use topic sentences correctly in their subsequent compositions. In contrast, the ESL instructor noticed that in her other beginning ESL composition class that did not participate in the service-learning project, these ESL writers struggled with composing accurate topic sentences throughout the semester. This anecdotal evidence suggests that ESL students in the service-learning class obtained a deeper and more meaningful level of knowledge as a consequence of the discussions they engaged in with their peer tutors about topic sentences.

Next, although the ESL students were required to read many complex historical documents about the Oakland building and received no guidance from their instructor in comprehending this literature, judging from their ability to discuss this information accurately and effectively in their letters, they were able to understand the text. A comparison of these students to the other learners enrolled in this beginning ESL writing course during the same semester yielded no statistically significant results for the WSA or the Compass Reading exam; however, the ESL students who participated in this service-learning experience achieved slightly higher GPAs and completed more college credits. The instructors believe that the ESL learners' comprehension and writing skills were enhanced enough to produce slight improvements because this project permitted

them to hear, see, touch, discuss, and immerse themselves in an authentic topic instead of one contrived by their teachers.

Overall, these findings indicate that the ESL tutees (those receiving the information) did not reap as many academic benefits as their tutors in the advanced writing class. That is, the design of this service-learning task did not place tutees in a situation where they had to understand and articulate reading material and writing techniques.

This observation suggests the need to design a service-learning experience to permit entry-level ESL students to coach elementary school children as they learn to read, thereby affording the ESL learners the opportunity to enhance their English language proficiency and their reading and writing skills in a less sophisticated environment.

Civic Responsibility

As a result of this service-learning project, the students acquired an in-depth awareness and appreciation for the rich history of the Oakland building and the college. Moreover, because of the students' efforts, the Oakland building received the distinction of a Queensmark, which is the equivalent of a Queens landmark. This project also introduced the possibility of obtaining the status of a New York City landmark for this site. Furthermore, after the advanced composition class read a *New York Times* article about a Columbia University service-learning project that permitted students to perform volunteer work for credits (Santora, 2008), they realized that service-learning had implications beyond their project. This notion was further enhanced when the concept of community service was emphasized in the platforms of both 2008 presidential candidates. Thus, as a result of this service-learning project, these readings, and the presidential election, our students began to view service in a broader context, and became more motivated to engage in civic action and to be good citizens at their school and in their communities.

Moreover, since the college was experiencing serious budget cuts at this time, the amount of tutoring that could be offered was severely limited. However, by participating in this project, the students in the advanced writing course provided their ESL tutees with many

hours of one-on-one individual assistance at no cost to the college.

Student Fulfillment and Socialization

Although the ceremony for the Queensmark occurred after the semester had ended and the grades had been submitted, many students from both classes voluntarily attended this service, which included their instructors, high-level college officials, representatives from the Queens Historical Society, and the press. These developmental students, who often indicate that they feel marginalized in the college setting (Chaves, 2006), were astonished by the fact that their letters had prompted this occasion and that the college president and a *New York Daily News* reporter wished to speak to them about their individual contributions, while their instructors sat quietly in the background and watched them glow.

This service-learning project not only benefited the college; it also simultaneously empowered developmental students to flourish academically and understand their worth in the college community. It should be noted that many students attend this community college because they are academically ineligible for a public-four year college. Thus, they often perceive themselves as second-class citizens (Chaves, 2006), marginalized and humiliated, especially when they are placed in remedial courses. However, this service-learning project appears to have alleviated this stigma by demonstrating the value of these learners in the college community, and it supports the findings of Stavrianopoulos (2008), who stated that service-learning experiences draw students together to form a community of learners in which social, academic, and community integration occurs.

The project also offered students exposure to the artwork in the Oakland building. When the students visited the art gallery at the beginning of the term, they viewed an exhibit entitled Blossoms and Fantasies by Yelina Tylkina, a renowned Eastern European artist. The students were intrigued by this artist's use of vibrant color and the unconventional nature of her work. During the tour, the students also viewed the gallery's permanent collection and were impressed by its extensiveness. Many indicated that they had no idea that the college

offered such a rich cultural experience that was free. Furthermore, later in the semester, several learners returned to the Art Gallery during their free time with family and friends.

One student in particular benefited strikingly from the assignment. Before this project commenced, this learner had refused to complete any assignments, strayed off task, and frequently wandered out of the classroom during lectures. However, when the students toured the Oakland building, this young person immediately offered to operate the instructor's digital camera and energetically photographed the entire facility and his classmates. He was completely enthralled and stimulated by this project, and for the first time in the semester worked conscientiously with his peer tutor to create a well-written letter. This student's positive demeanor continued throughout the remainder of the term. The instructor believes that this transformation resulted because this very creative learner had discovered a constructive way to release his artistic energy, instead of feeling confined and trapped in a highly traditional learning environment. This situation reflects the findings of McCarthy (1996), who discovered that one-time or short-term service-learning projects can result in perceptual and attitudinal changes among the participants.

Another student from the advanced developmental writing class also indicated that as a high school student, he participated in the College Now program offered at Queensborough. At this time, he had toured the campus and was quite impressed by the historical significance and beauty of the Oakland building, and he equally was surprised that it also housed a museum. In the end, he indicated that this historical and cultural center was a major reason for his decision to enroll at Queensborough. He was thrilled when he heard that visits to this facility would be incorporated into his writing course curriculum. This account suggests that the Oakland building may play a role in attracting students who seek creative, enriching educational experiences.

Socialization is an essential component of the college experience, especially since a lack of integration into the college environment diminishes commitment, increases isolation, and raises the possibility of leaving before completion (Tinto, 1993). Because this

community college is a commuter school, the classroom environment is the primary conduit for establishing relationships. For the most part, the students in these two service-learning classes were incoming freshmen; therefore, when the semester commenced, they were noticeably anxious, withdrawn, and awkward. However, as the term concluded, the students in both classes became part of an integral unit and formed friendships. They also demonstrated confidence by happily reading aloud and readily sharing their thoughts and opinions with their classmates. Moreover, because the students from both classes became comfortable socializing with each other, the ESL students were afforded the opportunity to improve their English by making friends with students whose primary language was English. This is important inasmuch as many ESL learners practice English only at the college, because they don't have the chance to engage in discourse outside of the academic environment. This observation supports Astin et al., who asserted that service-learning activities generate more student-to-student discussions.

In addition to the students bonding with each other, the professors also became personally acquainted with the learners in both classes. In fact, one student in the advanced composition class for native speakers was clearly an ESL learner, but was accidentally enrolled in the wrong course. When the ESL instructor became aware of this, she worked with this young woman in the office and by e-mail. They formed a collegial working relationship likely to endure throughout this student's college years. This situation also supports the findings of Astin et al., who contended that service-learning experiences generate more student-faculty interactions and support.

Conclusion

As Rohn (2006) observed, "Giving is better than receiving because giving starts the receiving process." When the instructors initially considered participating in a service-learning project, they were apprehensive about asking developmental writing students to perform a community service because of the demands of the WSA, the large class sizes, the limited class time, and the additional time needed to plan, execute, and manage such a program. However, this project has demonstrated the adage that

the giver receives more than the receiver. Although these students enabled the college to receive a Queensmark for a noted historical site on campus, they also reaped the benefits of: (a) improving their reading, writing, and communication skills; (b) acquiring respect in the college community; (c) enhancing their self-worth; (d) establishing new relationships; and (e) cultivating positive attitudes. Clearly, this venture has repaid these developmental learners many times over, and it will continue to produce benefits every time they write a letter or paper or stroll past the Oakland building, because they will recall what they have accomplished for the college community and themselves.

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