

Blending Service-Learning with Preparing Secondary School English Teachers

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Summary: An English education professor restructures an upper level methods course to include service-learning in order to encourage students to question paradigms of teaching, as well as to develop their own identities as future teachers.

Background

Teaching English in the Middle/Secondary School (C&T 440) is an English education methods course that focuses on understanding middle and secondary students as literacy learners. Prior to the Fall 2009 semester, the course traditionally included a 12-hour observation component. However, in an observation role, pre-service teachers could not take an active teaching role. I wanted to rethink this model and give my students a hands-on teaching opportunity.

My own research had led me into the realm of service-learning. Educators and researchers understand service-learning to be a successful teacher education practice that helps expose beginning teachers to diverse settings. Because it works against the traditional teacher-centric instruction model, service-learning also offers a space in which one can reconsider the teacher-student relationship.

By creating this space to question the traditional model of teaching, particularly when focused on teaching English, one can situate service-learning within what David E. Kirkland refers to as the “New” English education. This approach values student voice alongside the canon and acknowledges the promise of fluctuating literacies alongside standardized literacies. The New English education is committed to diversity, technology and hybridity, and is both a reaction to and an interaction with the current state of language in our world. Consequently, the process of training pre-service teachers to embrace and understand the New English education becomes one of encouraging beginning teachers to undergo a shift from an alignment with the standardized, white, schooled literacy to a pluralistic understanding and acceptance of what literacy is and can be.

With these concepts in mind, I have revised C&T 440 across several semesters in order to reflect ideas about service-learning and expose students to larger questions about English education. The following questions helped frame my revisions:

- How do pre-service English teachers conceptualize their roles (both present and future) through the context of a service-learning experience?
- How does this conceptualization, in turn, suggest the relationship they will have with their students?
- What do pre-service teachers’ responses to service-learning reveal about the ways in which the role of the teacher must shift within the New English education?

Implementation

When I initially revised C&T 440, in Fall 2009, I added a service-learning component that utilized traditional school/educational settings. Over the summer of 2009 I chose three local sites where students could work: an after-school program at a junior high school, an English Language Learners tutoring program at a high school, and a high school class entitled Writing for the College Bound. The Center for Service Learning at KU helped facilitate these connections. After the connections were made, a representative from each site visited my class early in the semester, and then the future teachers chose the site at which they preferred to be placed; pre-service teachers were then assigned a middle or secondary school learner to work with.

Before entering their assigned sites, I presented the concept of service-learning to my students and framed the concept by presenting scholar Linda Flower's work in that area. I also had a representative from KU's Center for Service Learning speak to the class. Then, approximately three weeks into the semester, the pre-service teachers entered their sites. Over the course of the semester, the pre-service teachers had to work with their middle/secondary learner for at least 15 hours and document their experience in a tutoring journal.

I provided a short guide for the journal assignment, which gave the students ideas of what to look for and include. I later assessed their journals rather loosely for completion, for depth of experience, how active the students were and how they were participating. I made comments in the students' journals rather than using a more rigid rubric. Along with the journal, students had two opportunities to discuss their experiences with me: in small peer groups several times during the semester and in focus group interviews toward the end of the term. Within the focus groups, I used a series of four prompts to help frame a discussion that I hoped would authentically reveal the pre-service teachers' feelings and perceptions about service-learning. Finally, the pre-service teachers had to write a brief reflection paper on the experience.

While the service-learning component did elicit some interesting themes and reflections (which will be discussed in the student work portion of this portfolio), I felt that the experience could have moved farther if I broadened my view of what constituted an "educational setting." Therefore when I offered C&T 440 in Fall 2010, I retained the service-learning component but shifted its focus even more greatly to a non-traditional, community-based setting. Rather than offering the future teachers three school-based site options, they could choose either the same junior high after-school program that was used in Fall 2009 or a youth after-school program through Family Promise, a local organization servicing homeless families in the Lawrence, KS, community.

Pre-service teachers were again asked to journal about their experience. Once again I conducted focus groups and asked the students to produce an end-of-term paper from the experience.

Student work

Of the 19 pre-service teachers in the Fall 2009 C&T 440, 10 chose to work at the junior high school after-school program, while four chose the English Language Learner program, and five the Writing for the College Bound class. I found that I was most interested in the pre-service teachers' experience at the after-school program. This was, in part, because this allowed the pre-service teachers to witness how middle/secondary students performed outside of the school day. This led me to a greater interest in how teachers might benefit by being exposed to "non-traditional" educational settings. When I revised the service-learning site options for Fall 2010, again the majority of the pre-service teachers were interested in the after-school program at the junior high school, with approximately two-thirds of the class choosing the junior high program and only five future teachers opting to work at the Family Promise site.

Through both the pre-service teachers' journals and the focus group discussions, three themes emerged through the course of both the 2009 and 2010 iterations of C&T 440: 1) the creation of a pedagogical "third space," 2) a disruption of a teaching mythology, and 3) a recognition of the "New" English education.

Theme One: A pedagogical third space for English teachers

For a beginning teacher, the creation of a pedagogical third space requires both the acquisition of specialized knowledge and the willingness to circumvent that knowledge and authority when students bring new Englishes (such as different vernaculars and multiethnic backgrounds) into the classroom. Learning to pedagogically negotiate this collision between the "official" and "unofficial" takes practice and reflection, and therefore it also involves close personal experiences that pursue such collisions.

This negotiation placed the pre-service teachers in a role that was less authoritarian, closer to students, and further away from the curriculum. By stepping outside what she saw as a traditional teacher role, Student A could interact with students in ways that valued their individual perspectives and needs; furthermore, she was able to see how the teacher's role is not always part of the "traditional" teacher identity in which a teacher creates and shares curriculum with a homogenous student group. In her journal, she reflected on how individual students' needs in the classroom, coupled with a flexibility in curriculum delivery, promotes a pedagogical third space in the classroom. Student B articulated how aspects of both *teaching* and *tutoring* are present in the teaching act, while Student C questioned the presumed teaching/tutoring dichotomy, thus leading her to a recognition that these roles are constructed and not necessarily separate. By building a relationship with students while also working with them on their writing, Student C began to see how the conventional roles of teacher and tutor may be more of a mythology than a reality.

During the Fall 2010 class, some students embraced the idea of expanding the "unofficial" and, therefore, themselves taking a different position. Student D, for

example, saw the non-traditional Family Promise site option as a chance to expose herself to a new perspective.

Theme Two: Disruption of a teaching mythology

Scholar Terese Thonus (2001) notes that there is, what she calls, a tutoring mythology that constrains the tutor's role, limiting it to "issues of personality and strategies of interpersonal interaction" (p. 61). I feel, similarly, that the role of "teacher as authority" bolsters a *teaching mythology* that constrains beginning teachers' views of an appropriate teacher's role. Several pre-service teachers in the class seemed bound to the teaching mythology, as they focused on the stymied position they felt in the service-learning context.

When listening to the comments made by those pre-service teachers, I detected an uneasiness in their observations stemming from their perception that they were en route to becoming a *teacher*, and therefore, were ready to shed the role of *tutor*. This location of being a "not-yet" teacher placed them at an identity point difficult for them to define. Not only were they asking, "Who are the students I am working with at my service-learning site?" but they were also asking, "Who am I at my service-learning site?" Such was the case for Student E, for whom this question expanded even beyond the teacher-tutor dichotomy.

Theme Three: Recognition of the New English education

Through service-learning, pre-service teachers also started to recognize that teaching is constituted by more than a series of teaching techniques. Instead, observing the manifestations of teaching English in "unofficial" school spaces assisted pre-service teachers with viewing teaching as a complex negotiation of multiple systems at play in the classroom (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Student E, for one, experienced the role of negotiation while working with a reluctant reader, implementing the New English education's focus on including the student's voice.

At times, though, this realization illuminated the multiple challenges that lie ahead in their future teaching careers. For example, Student F had pictured a student body that contrasted with the actual majority white, college-bound population with whom she worked. When contrasting different student bodies, she began to ask such questions in her journal as, "Would such a class be less prepared and less motivated? Would such a class have to be *taught* to question the status quo?" Reading journals like those written by Student F encouraged me that pre-service teachers were asking difficult questions and were in the process of discerning how a movement to a new paradigm of teaching English might be reached.

Reflections

Overall, I am happy with how the hands-on, service-learning addition has pushed the students. As the future teachers' narratives show, service-learning has the potential to prompt pre-service English teachers to not only understand students as literacy learners, but also to understand themselves as future teachers of the New English education.

I also feel that the service-learning aspect had the unintended outcome of being a resilience builder. Being beginning teachers, the students did not necessarily have much experience yet in building up the resilience they will need in their future classrooms. Sometimes the pre-service teachers would go to their site and would feel there was nothing for them to do, or that the student with whom they were working was not progressing as they would like, and, therefore, they would become discouraged. These moments helped the future teachers develop coping skills and experience that they will be able to draw as student teachers and, ultimately, practicing teachers.

When I first revised C&T 440 in Fall 2009, I was apprehensive about focusing the new service-learning component wholly on a community-based project. Therefore, I retained traditional, school-based sites. I decided to take a step into working with community-based sites in Fall 2010.

At the beginning of Fall 2010, I did not know how pre-service teachers would respond to a community-based service learning experience. I did not know if they would feel that such an experience was too "distant" from the institution of school—the place that they anticipated working in their future careers as teachers. I also imagined they might be wondering, "What does tutoring homeless students in a somewhat informal manner have to do with becoming an English teacher?" Yet, in my mind, such an experience would have a lot to do with becoming a teacher; I knew that it would assist beginning teachers in fostering authentic relationships with young people.

At times, the institution of school can work against promoting such authentic relationships, and teachers can become consumed with their lesson plans and time management at the expense of really knowing who their students are. Service-learning, especially in community sites where some of the teacher/student role boundaries are lessened, can be a place where beginning teachers start to examine how they interact with their students. Do they take cues from students regarding what their interests are? Do they seek out answers and solutions to problems based on the context they are in and the students' needs (as opposed to relying on preconceived ideas about students' learning)?

The pre-service teachers who participated in service-learning at Family Promise during Fall 2010 were responding to the questions above. I was pleased to see them seek out the experience with homeless youth and especially pleased with the relationships they fostered with the students with whom they worked. The pre-service teachers left the experience with optimism and excitement about working with school-aged children in the future.

In Fall 2011, I aim to implement only community-based settings for the service-learning component of C&T 440, seeking to engage beginning teachers in discussions about how such sites differ from traditional school-based sites. I am looking forward to seeing what kind of relationships can be developed through such experiences and what possibilities exist for taking teacher education out into the community.