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# Taking the Class out of the Classroom: Libraries, Literacy, and Service Learning

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**Taking the Class out of the Classroom:  
Libraries, Literacy, and Service Learning  
Jayne Blodgett, (University of Northern Colorado)**

**Abstract**

In the fall of 2013, the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM) offered a First Year Seminar class focused on libraries and literacy with a service learning component. The students in the class spent part of class time learning about library science theory and the other part implementing that theory in three different service learning projects: leading storytimes for K-3 ESL students, offering computer literacy sessions for senior citizens, and assessing library use for the UMM campus library. The service learning component was a valuable tool in helping the students better understand the importance of libraries and literacy, especially in a small, rural community.

keywords: service learning, literacy, Information Literacy instruction, First Year Seminar courses, undergraduate student engagement, community engagement

The University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM) is a small, public, residential liberal arts college located in West Central Minnesota. While part of the University of Minnesota system, each system campus has its own Carnegie classification and mission. In addition to being a selective public liberal arts college, UMM is committed to sustainability and social justice, having its own Office of Community Engagement (OCE), which coordinates the campus volunteer and service learning programs in a number of disciplines such as art and Spanish.

My interest in service learning is rooted in my own commitment to volunteerism and social justice. Additionally, in thinking about teaching a course on libraries and literacy, service learning seemed the perfect pedagogical tool for taking the values and theories of librarianship from the classroom to the "real world." A colleague, Heather James (Marquette University), and I first designed this course as a study abroad class to El Salvador. We researched options and decided on an NGO based in Chicago working with schools in El Salvador. The organization, Contextos ([www.con-textos.org](http://www.con-textos.org)), works in a

number of schools around El Salvador, training teachers and developing libraries and literacy programs. Due to unforeseen circumstances, we were unable to teach the class, but I was able to adapt the proposal to fit UMM's First Year Seminar program, offering *Beyond Shushing: Libraries and Literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in the fall of 2013.

### **Service Learning and the Academic Library: Opportunities Abound**

Service learning has become more popular in higher education over the last twenty years, with many schools seeing the advantages of community engagement programs for the school and the student. Academic libraries have been slower to embrace service learning especially in for-credit undergraduate programs. While there is ample literature about libraries' involvement in service learning classes through Information Literacy instruction or as the collaborating partner, and there is a growing body of literature on the importance of service learning classes to graduate LIS programs, there are fewer examples of academic libraries at undergraduate institutions offering for-credit library-related service learning classes.

John Riddle questioned library commitment to service learning in the early 2000s (Riddle, 2003), and Westney echoed his concerns three years later (Westney, 2006), but in the past 10 years libraries have become active supporters of service learning. Service learning allows a student to put the theories discussed in the classroom into practice in the “real” world, and it allows students the opportunity to “see the relationship between those serving and being served as reciprocal, with both sides having something to gain from the experience” (Ball, 2008, p. 72). By combining “community service with academic instruction” students can focus on “critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility” (Heiselt and Wolverton, 2009, p. 84). Students also have the opportunity to learn about current community issues and how those relate to classroom learning (Heiselt and Wolverton, 2009).

Librarians are uniquely positioned to “assist students in recognizing and strengthening the connection between their service experience and their course assignment” (Nutefall, 2014). In fact, students who work with librarians during their service learning class are more likely to use more and a wider variety of sources than those who did not work with a librarian, and they are more likely to be concerned with issues of bias in the field (Nutefall, 2009). As libraries continue to transition from being

thought of as a warehouse for materials to a “dynamic institution of communication and knowledge dissemination” (Herther, 2008, p. 388), the opportunities to be involved with service learning expands. Additionally, libraries have strong connections to faculty and staff across the disciplines as well as connections to the wider public, allowing libraries to support service learning classes across the university (Herther, 2008; Yates, 2014).

Libraries support service learning in three ways – through research assistance, as host for a service learning project, and/or by teaching a library course with a service learning component. The first two options are represented in the literature primarily in undergraduate classes. For example, librarians at Eastern Washington University worked with students in communication classes to market and teach RefWorks to other students (Meyer and Miller, 2008). Libraries have also facilitated service learning opportunities with area public libraries (Heiselt and Wolverson, 2009), and computer training for individuals with intellectual disabilities (Whitaker and Albertson, 2011).

Graduate LIS programs have actively integrated service learning into their programs in order to combine practical experience with a greater understanding of societal issues, such as the digital divide and equity of access (Overall, 2010). Albertson and Whitaker concur that LIS students need to “be equipped with the tools to initiate, foster and maintain community partnerships that will benefit communities as a whole and non-dominant groups in particular” (Albertson and Whitaker, 2011). They argue that service learning in an LIS program allows the students to see the pedagogical outcomes of their studies (Albertson and Whitaker, 2011). Since libraries are focused on meeting community needs, it is only logical that students should have the opportunity to put their classroom learning to use in a service learning class. Some of the projects represented in the literature include developing websites for public libraries (Elmborg et al., 2001), computer classes for job seekers (Roy, Bolfin and Brzozowski, 2010; Brzozowski, Homenda, and Roy, 2012), peer-tutoring (O’Brien et al., 2014), creating a library at a homeless shelter (Peterson, 2003) and creating a virtual museum of the American Indian (Roy, 2001).

There are, however, a minimal number of articles that discuss service learning classes focusing on libraries and/or literacy at the undergraduate level. Maureen Barry, editor of the Service Learning Librarian blog

<http://www.libraries.wright.edu/servicelearning/>) discusses the class at Wright State University which involved students in providing research for local nonprofit agencies (Barry, 2011). While I'm sure there are other undergraduate courses that combine service learning and library/literacy skills, they are not widely represented in the literature.

## **The Course**

Taught in Fall 2013, this 2-credit class met for 50 minutes twice a week, which allowed me to divide the schedule, so we focused on libraries and literacy theory one day a week and service learning theory and the class project on the other day. The First Year Seminars at UMM have a very specific mission of introducing students to the type of work expected of them in college, while creating an intellectual community where they develop close relationships with their classmates and the faculty member. The course sizes are small, with a maximum size of 14 students.

Prior to starting the semester I worked with our OCE coordinator, Argie Manolis, to determine which programs best fit the needs of the class and the greater Morris community. I was conscious of not making the projects too large and complex because of the limitations of only teaching a two-credit course. After discussing the course objectives and community needs, we decided on three community partners offering four projects: story time at the public library, story time with evening ESL students (k-3), library instruction at Briggs Library (UMM's library) for adults in the ESL program, and computer literacy sessions with senior citizens. A fifth project, a usage study for Briggs Library, was coordinated by the library separately from the OCE.

At the start of class, I made it clear to the students that there was a service learning project required in the course which would potentially involve work off-campus and outside of the scheduled class time. While the course description contained this information, many of the students didn't know what that meant. The idea of a semester-long group project was not enthusiastically received by everyone in the class, as a number of students mentioned in their end-of-the semester response papers. For the first time in my teaching career, I did not let the students choose their own group. Instead, I created an online survey for them to complete after hearing presentations from each of the community partners. The survey asked questions about project

preference, including a question about any projects s/he did not want to work on, previous experience working with the constituent populations, and concerns about working in a group. I tried to accommodate students' interests as much as I could, but I wanted to create groups that had the greatest chance for success. Since dividing the students into groups came in week three, I had a good sense of the students' strengths and weaknesses. In the end, only three projects were selected: ESL story time (k-3), computer literacy for older adults, and the Briggs Library usage study. While I was concerned about assigning groups, the students appreciated being organized by interest, and as one student noted in her final reflection paper: "This way of assigning groups keeps us from just being a group of friends that just want to be together and focuses our attention on the project's topic."

Once the groups were assigned, I handed out more specifics about the project requirements. While these were discussed in the syllabus, I created individual assignment handouts and rubrics for each component. The components were also designed to keep the students on schedule, since I didn't want them to leave everything until the end. The service learning project, including periodic reflection essays and day-to-day communication and planning, constituted 60% of their total grade. The specific assignments were:

- Email to the sponsor indicating involvement with the project and arranging an initial in-person meeting. This allowed me the opportunity to talk about how to write a professional email.
- Group charter to define the project goals and parameters, including important due dates and contact information. A sample charter was provided as an example.
- Periodic check-in reports (200-300 words) about how the project is going and any concerns with either the project itself or someone's work. A response of "Everything is fine," was not acceptable.
- Lesson plans for each session that included a Works Cited list to demonstrate the plans were pedagogically based.
- Presentation of the project, which I attended.

- Reflection paper (5-7 pages) that allowed the students to detail the work they did, how they think the project went (both the good and the bad), and what they learned about themselves and the community.

In addition to keeping them on task, the assignments allowed the students to develop valuable critical thinking and writing skills. One student noted the email assignment taught her how to be professional and still be herself: "I now know that being professional doesn't mean using advanced language, it means knowing what you are talking about and who your audience is." The lesson plan assignment required research to justify and support their plan, which also allowed me the opportunity to talk about library resources and information literacy. The two library sessions also served as research time for the other major assignment in the class – a 5-7 page research paper on the future of libraries. In addition to developing lesson plans with learning outcomes and specific activities, the students did a “dry-run” of their activities with the class. The students reported this being very helpful in seeing what would and wouldn't work as well as getting over some performance anxiety. While I was concerned about spending so much class time working on their projects, one student reported the in-class practice session was “the most useful part of the project.” Furthermore, spending that time allowed them to ask questions and work through issues with others in the class. It was a useful method for demonstrating how the theoretical work we had done in class could be implemented in very practical ways, a hallmark of experiential learning.

### **What the Students Learned About the Community**

Since a substantial difference between volunteering and service learning revolves around the reflection that takes place, the reflection papers were an important component of the class. Reflection allows the students to think about what they learned about themselves and the community. At the start of the class, I don't think the students realized how much they would enjoy their projects or understand how much they would learn about their place in the Morris community. For example, the story time group focused their readings on writing, reading, and finding books. For one session they read *Tomas and the Library Lady*, which resonated with the children at story time, as the story revolves around an immigrant child of migrant farmers. While the Mexican

community in Morris is not migrant, the children enjoyed hearing a story that mirrored their own life in some way. The students also wanted to give the children and their families the opportunity to get library cards, so during the second session, all of the children, not just those in the k-3 group, came to the library to get cards and check out books. While it was a bit chaotic, it was rewarding to see how excited the students and the children were to use the library. Working with a non-native speaking population was eye-opening for the students in this group. Each of them mentioned in their reflection papers how language barriers affect day-to-day life, especially in a small town. The one student in the group who did speak Spanish commented how uncomfortable she felt speaking Spanish to the parents because she was not fluent. It gave her insight into how difficult, frustrating, and intimidating it must be for the families who are not fluent in English to live in Morris.

The students who worked with the older adults on their computer skills at the public library were surprised by the interest the attendees had in not only working on their computer skills, but also in getting to know the students. As one student noted, “it was surprisingly a lot of fun and I learned a lot about the elders of the community and the experiences they have had in life. I have more appreciation for the rewards of teaching and reaching out to others....” One of the students, an international student from China, was very concerned about his language skills, specifically the seniors’ ability to understand his English. The seniors loved the chance to hear about his life growing up in China and what he thinks of living in rural Minnesota. In a small town with a moderate town/gown problem, the senior computer literacy project was an excellent way to bridge that divide, with all parties leaving the sessions knowing more about each other, as well as about how to send photos through email.

The last group, the Briggs Library usage study, had a different experience from the other groups because they worked on-campus with the Briggs Library staff. The outreach for their group was to host two focus group sessions exploring how students use the library’s physical space. While there was some marketing that had to be done, this project was not as focused on community outreach as the ESL and computer literacy classes were. The students’ final reflection papers indicated that they were happy with the outcome of the project because they could see tangible results, but they missed the chance to get to know the wider community.

The service learning project helped the students see that they were doing something for someone who was depending on them. It forced the students to see that it wasn't just their grade that mattered; what they did had an impact on the broader world.

### **What the Students Learned About Themselves**

The students learned a great deal about working with others, not just in their individual groups, but in working with the community sponsor as well. Many of them indicated at the beginning of the project how much they hated working in small groups and how concerned they were about the amount of work expected of them. By then end of the semester, however, most had learned valuable skills to use in other classes and in their work outside of the classroom.

For example, one student working on the Briggs Library usage study discovered herself the "leader" of the group, coordinating the submission of assignments and setting the schedule. She learned that she could be "a 'take charge' kind of person. I am capable of leading people." This was a new role for her, and she was happy to learn from her group members how much they appreciated her leadership skills. Another student in the same project group learned about the importance of taking ownership of a project. She felt "there was a sense of purpose to this project...[and] it helped my work ethic." She wrote she had a "desire to please the group, not just myself or the teacher."

The students also learned the importance of organization and deadlines. One group, the students working with elders at the public library, realized they needed better organization. One student pointed out that they failed to assign each person in the group an area of responsibility, which was a recommendation I made early in the semester. In his reflection paper, this student noted "I think we should have taken the advice to make sure everyone had a role to play that would keep the group functioning well." He also mentioned that "organization was the one thing our project needed." While the computer literacy sessions went well, the group didn't have much publicity, so the turnout was quite low. This allowed them the chance to really talk with the residents who came, but it didn't meet the need of the library to reach a wider audience.

### **What I Learned, Moving Forward**

The first and most important lesson I learned was that service learning classes are a lot more work than a traditional class, but the experiential learning the students do in the class is worth the additional effort on my part. While the traditional class preparation isn't more work than other courses I've taught, helping students coordinate three separate projects and attending each of their community sessions added time to my schedule. It was important to me, though, that I be there to support them and answer questions when they had them, especially since I was working with first-year, first semester students who were not as familiar with UMM or the Morris community as upper-division students might have been. I know there are classes where the community partner grades the final presentation, and while I asked for feedback from the partners, it was important for me to be there to evaluate the students' work.

I was impressed by my students' hard work and by the fact that they took their projects seriously. While they didn't always do all the assignments or readings for class discussion, they were committed to delivering an excellent experience when it came to working with their constituent populations. I only had to minimally remind them to meet with their community partners, and I didn't worry they wouldn't show up on their project days.

We spent a great deal of time talking about how to avoid seeing the service learning projects, especially those working with minority populations, as the solution to larger social issues. I wanted the students to explore the larger implications of small volunteer projects. I had the students read part of Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to open up the dialogue. I was concerned this discussion would be challenging for first-year students, but they were very interested in the topic. They seemed to understand that teaching one ESL class or helping the students find a book in the library wouldn't solve the larger issues immigrants might face. It was also clear to me during our discussions that they were keenly aware of how volunteering even for one class could open up a dialogue and create an environment where larger, more complicated issues could later be discussed. A number of the students took the skills they started to develop in class and continued to work for programs sponsored by the Office of Community Engagement. It was rewarding to see how the service learning component helped the students better understand the theoretical materials, as well as encouraged them to stay involved with the Morris community.

I vacillate between wanting the course to be 4 credits or 2 credits. This first time teaching it, the course was 2 credits, primarily for my own well-being, since I taught the class in addition to my normal workload. However, I believe that I could do much more with it as a 4-credit class. In addition to the service learning project, the students had to write a research paper exploring some aspect of the future of libraries. Unfortunately, because of time limitations, their papers didn't get as much attention as they should have. When I teach this again, if it remains 2 credits, I want to keep a more theoretical paper as part of the class, but it will not be a full-blown research paper. My thought is to have smaller response papers based on the readings and class discussions, which should also get the students more involved with the readings.

Moving forward, I want to develop a class for upper-division students that would focus more on providing research to non-profit groups in our region. UMM's Center for Small Towns works with rural community partners to provide research and resources for Minnesota's small towns while creating learning opportunities for faculty and students. While my course primarily worked with public libraries, a course for upper division students would allow me to explore issues of information and digital literacy, information ethics, and other topics related more directly to access instead of services. UMM is also revitalizing its Service Learning Faculty Fellows program, and I was a member of the 2015-16 cohort. A group of five of us had the opportunity to learn more about service learning pedagogy and start planning a course to teach in the next year. As is so often the case, it was valuable to be in a room with others who have the similar interests but varied approaches to teaching service learning.

I also had the chance to work with students who were interested in libraries and how they provide information access to the communities they serve. They asked insightful questions and thought deeply about the challenges and opportunities facing today's libraries. I would encourage anyone who is thinking of incorporating service learning into a library class to do so. It was a fantastic experience for all the stakeholders – me, the students and the community partners.

If you would like to see a copy of my syllabus or have questions about the course, please feel free to contact me at [jayneblodgett@gmail.com](mailto:jayneblodgett@gmail.com).

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