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SPECIAL SECTION: EMPATHY AND ETHICS

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MISSION AND MONASTERY:

EMPATHY, ETHICS, AND THE CHALLENGES

OF TWO COMMUNITY-BASED COURSES

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By their very nature, courses that contain a community-based component invite opportunities for the practice of empathy, whereby students come to identify with their community partners (such as the low-income children they tutor, the elders they interview). In fact, the building of empathy through the cross-dialogue often catalyzed by such classes has been touted as crucial in the practice of civic literacy. David Schoem, for example, argues that participatory democracies such as ours require individuals be able to bridge the spectrum of social differences, while others claim the ability to consider an issue from another person's point of view is necessary for individuals to invent arguments that make sense to someone else. [1] Yet the typical undergraduate experience does not often provide enough opportunities for the kind of "democratic exchange" that would build trust, especially across racial and/or socioeconomic lines. As Schoem argues, "Many of the young people entering our colleges and professional schools have grown up in gated communities and segregated schools, and they continue that pattern of separation at college through membership in monoracial and monoclass fraternities and sororities" (16). For these writers, the community-based course provides an opportunity to build such empathy, which engenders the social trust necessary for democratic practices.

Having taught at least two kinds of community-based courses, I can testify to the empathy such courses encourage. However, I have also found that the quality of the empathetic experience and the consequent student writing, as well as corresponding ethical challenges, can differ significantly depending on whether the student is more involved in the "mission" (that is, in the field) or "monastery" (at the computer or office) side

of community work. To put it another way, whether the student-missionary is engaged in tutoring homeless children or is writing a grant proposal in the organization's office affects the degree of empathetic identification the student feels; and even, the quality of the writing she produces. My argument is that the community-based course requires a balance of field and office, of mission and monastery. Teachers such as myself must strategize and intervene, to ensure that the "missionaries" get a sense of the overall systemic practices, policies, and interventions that can and will affect their community partners, while the "monks" need a hefty share of the work in the field: through learning they get from their peers, field trips, readings, and guest speakers, as well as in the community itself.

The claim that empathy is integral to the intellectual and ethical work of the community-based class represents a gestalt shift in the very concept of how feelings work in the classroom. The claim for empathy runs counter to certain philosophical traditions, for example, the assertion of Socrates (in the *Crito*) that to make a moral decision, one must use reason and avoid the influence of the emotions, or the Kantian view that if action is based on the feeling of altruism, then it has no moral value (Gallo 48-49). Instead, recent practitioners of the community-based course have placed feelings at the heart of student learning; they link empathy to the university's public mission of citizenship and participatory democracy; they assert that the empathy engendered through community interactions fosters "critical and creative thinking," especially through what is alternately called role-playing or perspective-taking (Gallo 44). Thus, rather than being seen as separate from thought, empathy is tied to critical thinking. As critics such as David Bleich remind us, feelings have always been an integral part of the development of human thought.

In the first of my community-based classes, where the students do life-story work with Detroit elders and children, their empathy for their partners seems to evolve almost naturally. According to Henry Clay Smith, "empathetic accuracy"—that is, the ability of an individual to perceive correctly the ways in which he is like another person and the ways he is different"—is enhanced by attraction, affection, and the length of acquaintanceship. That is, the more we like a person, and the more time we spend with them, the more we tend to empathize them in ways that are true. The one-on-one semester-long relationships that my students develop with their Detroit community partners hones this kind of empathy. My students get to know their partners well, and write moving, eloquent pieces both about and with them as a result. And yet this relationship is necessarily fleeting. The students come and go, exercising a kind of mobility that affects the balance of power. More importantly, what is to keep my student from just seeing this work as only a do-gooder moment? A line on their resume? An opportunity to "save" their presumedly inferior partner? In the words of Margaret Himley, how can this work go beyond the empathetic moment to one of "social understanding, from an individualistic, symptomatic reading…toward a systemic, historicized understanding of the world as a common project" (416)? How can we create multi-leveled learning opportunities for our students, our community partners, ourselves? What kind of empathy are we encouraging, and what is it for?

Yet in the other class—the Community Writing and Public Culture course—empathy is often the very thing most needed. Here, as the students work, and to some extent write, for non-profit organizations, they may end up researching and revising handouts on prisoner health care—without ever setting foot in a prison. Last semester, a student who had never visited a low-income housing site struggled to put interesting leads into her newsletter articles. Here the question becomes: how can one write in meaningful and even, emotional ways about that which one does not know, or has not encountered?

In both classes, we begin by critiquing the very idea of service, by asking students to explore their various subject positions and attitudes toward service. What are our expectations and attitudes? What are our goals? Our views of the others we serve? What do we know of them, and where do our ideas come from? This discussion is informed by our reading of a writer like Robert Coles, on his early experiences of and attitudes toward service, and Barbara Ehrenreich, who writes of her experience "as" a waitress, in an "experiment" she temporarily undertook to see if she could survive on minimum wage. How do the attitudes of these two writers toward service compare to our own? How does their use of their community experiences for "research" differ from our own use of community work, for our class? What does each writer learn from her/his work? What facilitates this learning, and what gets in the way? Next, we complicate our analysis by assessing Coles and

Ehrenreich in light of Paolo Freire's notion of true dialogue. Are either Coles or Ehrenreich having a "true dialogue" with the people they work for and with? Can there even be true dialogue when one speaks for (rather than with) another, as Ehrenreich does? Freire and our ensuing discussions gives us a framework, both theoretical and practical, from which to view and discuss the subsequent community work the students perform throughout the course.

As Carolyn O'Grady asserts, "Each of us participates in multiple group memberships based on race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth, and to that degree, our personal and social power and privilege are relative….Some of us have greater access to power and privilege than others" (3-4). Recognizing the classroom as an interpretative community representing multiple interpretative communities, we discuss and reflect on ourselves and the others we encounter through the course. How does our idea of prisoners change, for example, when we learn that one of our classmates has a friend in prison? When we have a ex-prisoner come into our classroom to talk about her life? When we view an art exhibit of prisoner work? Ann E. Green argues that individual students bring different subject positions to the class, and that service is not the same for everyone. As she puts it, if she cannot undo the power relations implicit in all community service, she can at least work to make these more visible, as she creates spaces for students to explore in class the different subject positions and relationships they bring to the service.

What students learn is that the relationship between the served (the insider) and the server (the outsider) is incredibly complicated. For Martha Nussbaum, empathy is always twofold, in the sense that we are always aware of our qualitative difference from the other. As she asserts in her discussion of our ability to empathize with suffering, "One must be aware both of the bad lot of the sufferer and of the fact that it is, right now, not one's own" (327). Quoting from Carl Rogers's definition of empathy, Delores Gallo puts the matter this way:

The state of empathy or being empathetic, is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but *without ever losing the 'as if' condition* ….one can make inferences and predictions consonant with those of the other, *while remaining oneself*. (emphasis mine; 46)

This distinction is important, because we are not the same as our partners, however empathetic we may be. We can never be fully in another person's shoes, though we may empathize with the struggles of their walk. In fact, it is just as important to recognize the ways that our situations and assumptions diverge as well as converge with those of others.

Using this same-different construct as a starting point, both of my courses invite students to compare their own situations to those of the individuals we encounter through our readings, class activities, and film. Students are asked to address such questions as: How am I like or unlike Mike Rose, the son of Italian, working-class immigrants? How are the circumstances of my educational experience like or unlike his? Making the classroom "personal," Green reminds us, can help "bridge the gap between the experience(s) of difference at the service-learning site, the experience of difference on campus, and the texts and theories that students read in the classroom" (282). Describing her own service work in the community years earlier, she writes: "It was not just 'there but for the grace of God go I,' but also, why, as a white person, wouldn't I have this same experience of poverty?" Examining our own motives for taking on this work, our attitudes toward our community partners, and our sameness and difference from them, is an essential part of this work. Unearthing the sources of our attitudes, our difference(s) also sensitizes us to interconnecting and systemic forms of oppression.

But such comparisons still remain dyadic: student/community partner. We also need to dismantle the hierarchies, to deconstruct the duality of privileged/non-privileged. In the case of my courses, students might be asked to compare Rose's situation to those described in other readings—such as the black child in Edward P. Jones's

short story "The First Day," or Richard Rodriguez in his analysis of his own bilingual education. How is Rodriguez's experience of education not like Rose's, even though both come from immigrant parents? How does the Chicano community Rodriguez describes seem to affect his sense of selfhood, of agency in the world (as opposed to Rose, who lacks this sense of community)? Highlighting the endless permutations of same/different helps us recognize the differences within difference. It encourages us to see the "story behind the story," as Linda Flower would call it; the "situated knowledge" of others (what she calls the "silent logic that 'others' use to make meaning"), at the same time we come to name our own. It makes it possible for us to better understand what Freire calls an individual's "contextual reality" (85). It also helps shifts the paradigm from "How am I like/unlike this person?" to "What can we learn from one another?"

In each class, we also build empathy through specific class exercises that have us experience, if only temporarily and through role-playing, some of the specific challenges our partners face. For example, to help my students recognize some of the difficulties felt by the mentally challenged in our culture, I facilitate an Aphasia Exercise in my community writing class. Borrowed from the University of Michigan's Aphasia Clinic, this exercise asks students to form pairs and to take turns communicating a "secret" written message to one another (such as "How do I get from Third Street to the pharmacy near the hospital?")—with one catch: no nouns or pronouns are allowed. The ensuing exercise in communicative frustration (the 10 to 15 minutes it takes for a partner to "get" the message) reflects the communicative challenges that many mentally challenged adults or new learners of English in our society face: that of conveying information and of being understood. After the exercise we debrief by asking questions of both the communicator and receiver: what did you feel? What was most difficult? How did you overcome this problem? What do you think you would do next time? I then link this back to our earlier discussions on the link between mental illness and homelessness, or of poverty and non-native speakers, and the essay we read on how mentally challenged individuals are treated in our prison systems. I might say: Suppose you are unable, because of your disability, to understand what the prison guard tells you to do? How do you think you would be treated? This kind of question also asks us to practice "rivaling," as Linda Flowers would call it—that is, we come to see both points of view: the prisoner's inability to understand, and the guard's frustration in not being understood. This is not to excuse or exonerate the guard of some of the egregious wrong-doings that have occurred in our prison system, but rather to understand better the challenges he might face, and to find the points in common he shares with others: prisoners, citizens, us. Other exercises highlight class and race difference, often in specific ways that relate to issues like mobility (such as the Bus Exercise, where I bring in local bus schedules and ask students to role-play an impoverished elderly citizen or single mom, who must find specific bus routes and times to get to a doctor's appointment, and then to school to pick up son or grandson). Finally, we also tell stories—for example, the story of the elder, who regularly took a two-hour bus ride each way in order get to one of our sites, and all for a low-priced lunch.

Such scaffolding is especially crucial in the community-based class in which students work and write for area non-profit organizations, where the work here is at the level of research and writing—in other words, the "monastery." In a recent version of this class, for example, some students tutored children in public housing, others wrote letters to prisoners and their families, still others did publicity for the women's clemency project, and so on. Last term, one student was asked to revise the 120-page manual for volunteers working with rape victims; in this case, while the student herself did participate in a 20-hour training session for this job, she had never served as a volunteer. What then were the ethical implications? As Green puts it, "The idea of writing for a service site puts the student in a position of a 'knower' that's presumptuous" (293).

Yet this very presumption was also mitigated by a number of factors, not the least of which was the difference between academic and community forms of discourse, and the very nature of the course. [2] As my students quickly learn, writing for a community site means writing as part of a team; the monastery is full of monks. Each draft that the student produces is reviewed by others in the community: a board member, an executive director, an on-site social worker. I have been blessed with what John McKnight calls good "community guides"—partners imbedded in communities who know and utilize the talents of their communities. For the most part, these guides wisely match writing assignments to the work in the field, to the temporary nature of our intersection, and even to the skills of the student herself. The other review board is the classroom itself; what the

monk writes is shared and critiqued by all of us in the room, who form our own writing team. In each instance, we role-play the audience—asking, for example: if I were on the board that read this grant proposal, how would I rate it? If I were a volunteer, would I understand this manual? Sometimes we even share community assignments, where several students will be assigned a section of writing from another organization. Sharing our community assignments this way helps make us all responsible. It also encourages us to see the many connections among our organizations: how the two low-income public housing sites where students tutor is linked to the prison advocacy work (some of the residents have family members in prisons), or the women's clemency project (which supports battered women who end up in prison). Each semester, I also devote a day to having the students work in small groups, role-playing the directorship of their respective organizations: how as a mixed group of community leaders and activists might they imagine addressing the social problems that exist in their communities? What issues do they identify, and how can they work together to solve them? As Gere and Sinor point out, there is growing awareness of the value of discourse communities, of the classroom itself asking students to imagine themselves in ongoing intellectual exchanges which may have political and social ramifications. In essence, then, the community work (and our responses to it) become "texts" that require their own analysis and reflection.

If it seems presumptuous of the student to write *for* her organization, it may be even more so for her to write *of* it, as I also require my students to do. In fact, one of our assignments in this class involves addressing the issue of what makes a good community project: not just structurally (in terms of the planning and organization, the follow-through, the evaluation and documentation afterward), but ethically (how are the community partners—those affected by the project—involved in the process?). In responding to this question, students may use the variety of community projects we have read about, as well as their own community site and others they have heard from class discussion. Students understandably feel nervous about evaluating the actual sites (somehow the readings seem "safer," more academic). Later, there is another form of this assignment—a letter they write to their community partner and have the option of sending. Finally, there is the Fact Sheet, where students identify and arrange statistics related to the social problems faced by their partners, and the Grant Writing Assignment where they explore and write letters to possible funding sources. Such assignments invite the students to see themselves as potential policy-makers, investors in the community; they help the student "place" her empathetic work in a larger socio-political context.

In her discussion of empathy, Delores Gallo writes that this trait requires a "tolerance for ambiguity, complexity, and deferred judgment." Henry Clay Smith puts the same idea this way: "Those who have the highest empathetic accuracy are those who have learned to realistically adapt their level to changing persons and situations" (122). Because we perceive a person to be a unified and simple whole, Smith argues, a common way to achieve a simple picture of a person is to fail to observe or to forget facts that do not fit in; facts that are ambiguous or seem to conflict. Empathy can and should be complicated. Recently, after our class listened with great interest to guest speakers from the Michigan Prisoner Creative Arts Project, and saw the exquisitely moving prisoners' artwork that the organization generated, one of my students wrote about her subsequent dilemma of advocating for a prisoner who, she later learned, had been convicted of rape. What was her stance to this prisoner to be? Empathy was raised by the prisoner art project; and taken away by her knowledge of his crime. As Margaret Himley writes: "Community service is an embodied encounter, noisy and 'morally ambiguous'—a noisy encounter that often does and should agitate us, teachers and students alike" (434). This agitation is a necessary part of the complexity that considerations of empathy and ethics invite, especially in the community-based classroom. Students must make use of the "cognitive dissonance" they experience when they encounter information that differs from what they already know. Jack Mezirow puts it this way: "Transformative learning involves a particular function of reflection: reassessing the presuppositions on which our beliefs are based and acting on insights derived from the transformed meaning perspective that results from such assessment" (18). [3]

On a recent course evaluation, one of my former students wrote that she was especially grateful for the "digressions" in discussion that I as an instructor allowed, because I saw them as absolutely central. The course is taught where the students come from. My student's recent question about her prisoner belonged in our class

discussion; it was important that we all reflect deeply on this matter. Although I provide a workable rubric and help keep things moving, the very subject of our course—of what we do in class each day—comes from the community work itself, and the students' ongoing, ever-changing responses. It is empathy, yes, but of a gritty and complicated sort that yields the kind of critical thinking—and even, eloquent writing—that our courses should engender.

Notes

[1] See also Barber, Newell, Noddings, and Mezirow on this issue. [back to text]

[2] For a good discussion of this difference from a pedagogical perspective, see Thomas Deans's excellent book *Writing and Community Action: A Service-Learning Rhetoric with Readings* (134-165). Using the framework of discourse communities, Deans's text makes the notion of academic vs. community forms of communication especially lucid to the undergraduate student. Other recent works that supply useful contexts and assignments include *Writing for Real: A Handbook for Writers in Community Service* (Carolyn Ross and Ardel Thomas); *Building Bridges: The Allyn & Bacon Student Guide to Service Learning* (Doris M. Hamner); *Service-Learning in Technical and Professional Communication* (Melody Bowdon and J. Blake Scott); and *Composing a Civic Life: A Rhetoric and Readings for Inquiry and Action* (Michael Berndt and Amy Muse). [back to text]

[3] Where Mezirow emphasizes the importance of reflecting on one's own premises, however, I would add essential reflecting on one's own background as well: where one comes from, the roots of those premises. Much has been written lately about the limits of the personal in a writing class, especially when yoked to a community component (Boyte, Gere, Herzberg). Critics argue that in such classes, students often tend to view service as an alternative to politics—an assumption that is enhanced by the one-to-one relationship with the "served" (Boyte). In such scenarios, the students see their work as a form of individual volunteerism, rather than related to a larger social and political agenda. As Gregory Jay puts it, "In the context of American individualism, the concept of cultural identity seems anomalous: identity is supposed to be personal, idiosyncratic, something that you do not share with anyone else….Dominant American culture defines the person as essentially private and thus lacking a cultural identity." Yet Jay encourages his students to see the connections between the personal and political: for example, that "To be a white person is to have certain advantages and distinctions socially, politically, and economically." The point is to identify examples of power and privilege, and the ways that structures of privilege organizing society as a whole impact individual lives. [back to text]

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