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English 400
Dr. Kim Emmons
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Service Learning in the Composition Classroom: An Assignment Critique

Source: Website of the New Mexico State University at Alamogordo:
<http://alamo.nmsu.edu/~rmcneel/299serv.htm>

Course Title: English 299: Special Topics (Service Learning)

Assignment: This course centers on a single assignment—the semester-long project students will produce in conjunction with a community organization of their choice. However, their final grades are based on four distinct components: an initial 1-2 page proposal, a 2-page midterm progress report, the main project text, and a 1-2 page completion report. Students are allowed a relatively high degree of freedom in choosing the kind of text most appropriate to their service work; the syllabus suggests that grant applications, brochures, or letter campaigns may all be considered acceptable styles of composition. Their reports are presumably expected to conform to the standards of formal academic English.

The syllabus does not specify the amount of time that students are expected to spend in service learning either per week or cumulatively throughout the semester. Class sessions are somewhat vaguely defined; for example, one week of the class features a session on “problems with writing,” which is followed by another devoted to “problems with document design.” This open-endedness is likely meant to accommodate the individualized nature of the coursework. There are no required texts for the class or specific readings listed on the syllabus.

A critique:

According to the English Department at NMSU-Alamogordo, the service learning element of this composition class allows students to “produce texts that can improve life in the community.” This course statement echoes the commonly accepted definition of service learning in general, as a “pedagogical technique for combining authentic community service with integrated academic outcomes.”¹ As Richard Kraft notes, this dual emphasis on bettering the community and the student is what differentiates service learning from other academic or extracurricular programs bringing students into non-academic environments; the former is about pedagogy rather than simple volunteerism, and is predicated on the idea that students will learn more than they would from a typical in-class presentation of materials. Its proponents attribute this to the fact that service learning allows students to test out new course materials in “real life situations,” and,

¹ Kim Patrick Moore and Judith Haymore Sandholtz, “Designing Successful Service Learning Projects for Urban Schools,” *Urban Education*, vol. 34 no. 4 (Nov. 1999), p. 480.

ideally, they will return to the classroom with questions raised by their experiences.² This emphasis on a cyclical or “dialogical” relationship between planned curriculum and the contingencies of the outside world means that instructors in a service learning-based course face the difficult task of creating a relatively flexible syllabus while still providing structure and direction.

This sample English class from Alamogordo is admittedly a special case because it is cross-listed under the more specific title “Project Management and Grant Writing.” But even with these circumstances taken into account, the syllabus leans quite far toward the open-ended side of the spectrum. More concrete plans for the course are possibly established at a later date, perhaps as students give their input, but there are a number of additional elements that could be added up front in order to help make the service learning approach more productive. For instance, the absence of reading assignments could be a cause for concern because the presentation and discussion of academic material distinguishes this technique from ordinary community service or vocational education. It is safe to assume that not all college students will identify with this teaching style’s ethical foundations or, for that matter, the lofty benefits that Kraft summarizes at one point as “social responsibility, community responsibility, and altruism.”³ Shared readings could help counter student’s omnipresent concerns about “their tuition dollars” by connecting what is going on outside the classroom to relevant theoretical and methodological literature—hence, academic legitimacy. Depending on the teaching institution, a writing class like English 299 might not be easy to organize around a straightforward political or sociological theme such as homelessness or the democratic process, and so readings might be designed to help incorporate students’ outside work into more general discussions about topics like speech genres, modes of argument, or discourse communities. These issues are still relevant even in a class focused on a specific form of textual production like grant writing.

A clearer statement about the quantity and kind of work that will be expected might also ease students’ concerns about entering into an unconventional learning process. Many will probably want to be assured that they and their peers will undertake and be graded on a comparable amount of work. Furthermore, defining exactly what an appropriate “text” entails may also prevent the participating community organizations from taking advantage of what could seem to be a free labor pool. Each student’s project obviously needs to accommodate their specific work environment, but it is conceivable that folding brochures or typing office memos could be generously defined as “learning experiences” in the absence of more rigid standards made clear to all involved. Similarly, participants in a class like English 299 might be able to better direct their service experiences if they know more in advance about what they need to evaluate in their midterm and completion reports; should they be seeking out the history of this organization and the social problems it addresses, its sources of financial support, its management structure, or perhaps its mission statement? Critical reflection is considered an essential part of the service learning approach, and it can probably be made more productive if instructors explain the process of reflection in advance. With these objectives clearly in mind, students can be asking appropriate questions of themselves

² Richard Kraft, “Service Learning: An Introduction to Its Theory, Practice, and Effects,” *Education and Urban Society*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Feb. 1996), p. 136.

³ Kraft, p. 146.

and others throughout the entire process and won't have to piece the answers together in retrospect.

Appendix:

**Syllabus for
English 299, Special Topics
Section 04, Service Learning
New Mexico State University at Alamogordo
Spring 2002
Meets Tuesday Evenings, 7:30-8:20
in CB 402, Writing Center Computer Lab**

The mission of the Alamogordo Branch of New Mexico State University, a comprehensive community college, is to:

1. provide quality education that includes academic, technical, vocational, developmental, and career oriented skills;
2. promote student competence, confidence, and success and provide personal enrichment programs through continued response to the cultural, intellectual, and economic needs of the community;
3. maintain active ties and continuity with the main campus;
4. afford equal opportunity for individuals who meet admission criteria to receive educational services within the community without regard to age, ancestry, color, disability, gender, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, or veteran status.

<u>Course Rationale, Objectives, and Methods</u>	<u>Assignments & Grading</u>	<u>Attendance</u>	<u>Instructor Contact info.</u> New Office Hours as of March 6, 2002
<u>Required Books & Materials</u>	<u>Course Schedule</u>	<u>Course & University Policies</u>	<u>Americans with Disabilities Act & Emergency info.</u>

Course Rationale, Objectives, and Methods

Rationale

Service Learning is an offshoot of experiential learning. Experiential learning emphasizes gains made in knowledge by working through a cycle of observing/doing, hypothesizing, experimenting, abstracting/theorizing, back to observing/doing.

Service Learning puts students into community organizations where they can work on projects for the good of the community and reflect (abstract, theorize) about the connections between their academic work and the work in the organization.

Service Learning in English involves students in organizational projects that are meant to produce texts that can improve life in the community: e.g., grant applications, brochures for community organizations, letter campaigns for fund-raising.

Objectives

- to improve the power and effectiveness of student writing
- to give students document design skills
- to introduce students to project management skills
- to improve community life

Methods

This course will be mainly project based. Students will need to take on projects for community or educational organizations to improve the functioning of those organizations, and to improve community life. Students will show the textual results of those projects: grant applications, proposals, brochures, procedure manuals, etc. Students will also write reflective reports to show how their academic course work connects to and extends the work of the organizations.

Assignments & Grading

It would be my preference to grade this course S/U: Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory. If there are reasons that I can't, then the following assignments and point values will be used to figure grades.

Assignments & Activities	Points
1-2 page proposal, specifying the project and the text to be produced, delivered	20
2 page mid-term progress report, reflecting on project tasks accomplished, project tasks remaining	20
Text resulting from the project	40
1-2 page completion report, reflecting on the project and connections to	<u>20</u>

academic course work	
	100 points

Semester Grade Scheme: 100-90 points = A; 89-80 points = B; 79-70 points = C; 69-60 points = D;

below 60 points = F

**Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory Grade Scheme: 70 points or higher = Satisfactory;
below 70 points = Unsatisfactory**

Attendance

Attendance is reported so that NMSU-Alamogordo may recapture federal funds allocated as financial aid to students who fail because they don't come to class.

For every session you attend, you will get 1 point, up to 15 points. Assuming that absences may be necessary in order to work with the organization, any session missed must be made-up with a 1/2 page progress report, or trip report, or work log entry, on the work of the community organization. For other kinds of absences, you will lose 10 points.

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<p>Instructor Contact Information Ron McNeel Instructional Coordinator for English & Reading Professor of English Faculty Office Building #115 Office Hours Monday & Wednesday: 10:30-12:30 Tuesday: 2-6 Thursday: By Appointment Only phone and voice mail: 505.439.3742 email: mneel@nmsua.nmsu.edu website: http://alamo.nmsu.edu/~rmcneel</p>	<p>Books & Materials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No books are required • NMSU-A computer account • access to a reliable computer with CD-ROM and email.
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Course Schedule

This is a tentative schedule. I will announce any major changes in advance, either through email or at this syllabus web page. When grant application deadlines loom, I will work with you to adjust assignments and activities.

Session # and Date	Assignments and Activities
1. January 15	Introduction to the set of interrelated classes: Grant Writing, Project Management, Service Learning
January 22	No Class: Martin Luther King Holiday
2. January 29	Discussions of Projects.
3. February 5	Specific connections made to grant writing projects and/or project management principles.
4. February 12	Proposals for projects are due.
5. February 19	Discussion of Projects, Workloads.

Session # and Date	Assignments and Activities
6. February 26	Discussion of problems with writing
7. March 5	Discussion of problems with document design.
8. March 12	2 page mid-term progress report, reflecting on project tasks accomplished, project tasks remaining
9. March 19	In-class work on project evaluation. In-class workshop on managing change.
March 26	No Class: Spring Vacation
10. April 2	Discussion of problems with writing, document design, projects.

Session # and Date	Assignments and Activities
11. April 9	Discussion of problems with budgeting.
12. April 16	In-class work on writing and software use.
13. April 23	Text resulting from the project due.
14. April 30	Begin Informal, Oral Reflective Reports. Written Reflective Reports Due.
15. May 7	Conclude Reflective Reports. Course wrap-up.