The Humanities and Citizenship: A Challenge for Service-Learning

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Service-learning is beginning to bridge the gap between university and community life, but if it neglects the humanities, service-learning will not realize its full potential. Pedagogy about the relevance of art, music, literature, and ideas to our immediate environments is needed. By stressing the humanities’ importance to individual and societal health and well-being, service-learning can provide opportunities to serve arts organizations and other humanistic institutions of learning. Such experiences will better ensure the development of life-long learning habits and humanistic citizenship.

It has not always been clear that service-learning and the humanities can work together, or even that they have common goals. Service-learning curricula at many universities consistently reveal the humanistic disciplines’ playing a minor role in the spread of service-learning. Why they are apparently hesitant to embrace service is not altogether clear, but it is usually assumed that the humanities are simply less relevant to real social problems. The social sciences and other disciplines deemed more directly relevant to professional training have gained increased clout on campus by attracting off-campus financial support and because they seem to address immediate social and political concerns. Humanities, it is assumed, is the territory of abstraction and reflection, but not action. It is time to leave behind such false and debilitating assumptions and allow both service-learning and the humanities the opportunity to reach their full potential through mutual enhancement.

Humanities and Consumerism

Some argue that the humanities are under attack from the political interests of the left, while others insist that we must more carefully guard our Western heritage. Both sides of this debate seem to miss the relevance of consumerism’s dramatic rise over the last several decades, accompanied by an almost orgiastic culture of materialism. A recent PBS documentary, Affluenza, explains that over 70% of Americans shop at a mall at least once a week; there are more malls than high schools in our country; on average over one year of our lives is spent watching commercials; only one third of all credit cards are paid off each month. Americans also have the largest gap between rich and poor of any industrialized nation and consume a disproportionate amount of natural resources every year, nearly 10 times more than the Chinese. Clearly our cultural trends, broadly speaking, are in opposition to the humanities, since they encourage a focus on material self-interest rather than enhance a thoughtful sense of others. If we can begin to accept the pervasive impact of this commodity-driven worldview, we must also acknowledge how consumerism inherently combats some of the highest hopes of humanities and service-learning alike.

A well-known challenge to many humanities students at universities across the country is what to do after graduation. The challenge for professors in humanistic disciplines is how to recruit students — given the recent appeal of financially attractive majors like computer science, economics, and business — and mentor them so that humanities play a meaningful role in their lives after graduation. That the humanities are under siege by a consumerist culture is also well known. In 1989, 75% of college freshmen reported their top priority in attending college was to become very well off financially. Only 41% indicated that developing a meaningful philosophy of life was a priority, down from 80% only two decades earlier (Kalata, 1996, p. 13). There is little reason to believe we have succeeded in reversing this trend in 2001. The President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, under Bill Clinton, reported in 1997 that “in the nation’s colleges and universities, the humanities curriculum, which with science and mathematics should be at the heart of a college education, is shrinking while vocational and pre-professional courses are increasing” (p. 10). The report also notes: “Although America’s universities provide the overwhelming majority of support for research and teaching in the humanities, the humanities are losing ground in the academy and find few external sources of funding” (p. 14).
Although other signs such as the growth of public humanities programs indicate interest in the humanities has increased in recent decades, consumeristic values threaten the humanities’ independence from materialism.

The response of many professors and administrators frequently only makes the problem worse. Often a study of the humanities is justified simply on the basis of the marketable skills students develop, such as writing, critical thinking, or cultural sensitivity. Even the President’s Committee report (1997) finds itself having to defend the humanities as “America’s cultural capital” and its “cultural holdings” that deserve the nation’s most careful “investments” (p. 13). In other words, there is nothing human about the humanities after all. And since the humanities in the public realm depend so precariously on volunteerism and philanthropy, it seems self-defeating to speak of the humanities in terms of monetary value. Evidence demonstrates that the humanities’ importance to our society does not necessarily rise according to the rate of economic growth or the availability of leisure time, as we might expect (p. 5).

While many accusations have been thrown at humanists for their apparently political agendas in the humanities, the attacks do not serve the humanities any better. It is true, for example, that since the 1960s our dedication to Western values has been more openly interrogated. In some cases, this openness has allowed some to feed on a destabilized curriculum to advance their own politics. However, it is foolish to assume that simply because we are engaged in thinking self-consciously and self-critically about our own assumptions, we are necessarily engaging in ideological chauvinism. Further, an unquestioned curriculum of traditional values would not be preferable, as it facilely assumes a universal and homogenous world, even in the West. What both extremes in this debate seem to neglect is a focus on the process of learning and building a learned-values system that is ethically and morally valuable to society as a whole; instead they focus on the content of what should be taught. In her 1988 report Humanities in America, Chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities Lynn Cheney goes so far as to claim that “deciding what it is that undergraduates should study is not only the most important task that a faculty undertakes... it may also be the hardest” (p. 14). As important as the choice of texts might be, the polemical debates over core curricula and the like simply reflect an educational system that has lost focus on the agency of individual students involved in character building. As Marion Montgomery (1990) observes, “the academy is charged with the perfection of the intellect in community” (p. 33). If the academy fails in this task, it proves itself to be “the carrier of this disease [of commercialism] that both feeds and feeds upon the isolation of the self. It has become so since abandoning its true professionalism, its proper calling as minister to a community of minds” (p. 34). Both sides of the humanities debates assume that ideas and values are part of a diet designed to produce specific social and political results. Students are increasingly perceived as rats in a sociological laboratory that, if given the right dose of the right texts and ideas, will produce the right behavior. It should strike us as ironic that this form of human commodification is patently symptomatic of consumerism, which the humanities presumably have the strength to combat. In such a view, human beings are objects, always imagined to be determined by environment, not subjects determined by choice. With such a lack of confidence in our own moral capacities, it is no wonder that the increasing interest in cultural studies and material culture — as valuable as it has been to help demythologize much of capitalism’s ideological power — has often failed to escape its own covetous romance with all things material.

What we are left with is a situation that depletes the humanities of their richest potential, which is to teach us the value of sustained wonder about the fascinating complexity of people and the world around us. This sustained wonder cannot thrive unless we appreciate the subjectivity of other cultures, other people, and their artistic expressions. And in such wonder, we have space to imagine our role in that world and then to act upon our imagination in ethical ways. It may seem odd to pair the humanities — a field that teaches needed detachment and self-awareness of the controlling forces in our environment — with service, which is chiefly concerned with engagement in the world. The point is that unless detachment teaches fresh and new forms of involvement and unless involvement is accompanied by self-reflection, we are left with increased alienation from society. It is precisely this unique balance between detachment and involvement that helps us to become at once more self-conscious and more conscious of others, thus freer to be moral. And unless the humanities are revived by means of service, and play a more central role in spreading service-learning, we will be left with a merely material definition of basic human needs.

Usually, however, our pedagogy and our culture itself teach that the humanities are subordinate to the forceful deterministic sense of reality that is defined by the news media, our market-driven popular culture, and the social sciences. The world, in
other words, is already predetermined and imminently knowable, as is our role in it. As novelist Marilynne Robinson (1998) argues, we live in an age of rampant determinism, becoming excessively confident in our ability to understand and predict human and natural behavior: “It is as if there is nothing to mourn or to admire, only a hidden narrative now and then apparent through the false, surface narrative” (p. 78). This is particularly true when humanistic study consists merely in pulling the man out from behind the curtain in order to display the various forms of discourse’s hidden assumptions. As Levin et al. (1989) state in a response to Cheney’s report, “All thought does, indeed, develop from particular standpoints, perspectives, interests” (p. A14). A more stunning insight might be to argue that the greatest challenge of humanistic inquiry is to identify those ways in which some human beings, however modestly or miraculously, manage to transcend those particulars.

**Humanities and Citizenship**

Much has been written in defense of the humanities, especially regarding their role in shaping a healthy democracy. The important Report of the Commission on the Humanities, *The Humanities in American Life* (1980), insists that:

> Education has a socializing dimension, as individuals share ideas, relate particular experiences to universal concerns, sharpen their moral faculties, and serve the community. The humanities, by emphasizing our common humanity, contribute especially to the social purpose of learning-to education for civic participation, which has been a strong theme in American society since the days of Thomas Jefferson. (p. 11)

Without the learned capacity to make informed and autonomous judgments, citizens are vulnerable to the powers of political and commercial propaganda, potentially forsaking their democratic responsibilities. As the Commission further argues, “Because the humanities ask what it means to be human, their importance to higher education is self-evident: in work or leisure, parenthood or friendship, citizenship or solitude, our college and university graduates should be sensitive to the moral, spiritual, and cultural life of the community” (p. 63).

It must be noted that such humanistic and democratically hopeful vocabulary is absent in the work of many academic scholars working in the humanities today. Indeed, even the most basic assumptions regarding the humanities’ universal reach have come under question. This is because we have supposedly become more aware of how such language can camouflage more insidious and less humane motives. Jefferson was a slave-owner, after all. We have been taught to pay more careful attention to how the universal language and aspirations of men like Jefferson were shaped by particularities of an individually experienced life, one shaped by class, gender, race, nationality, etc. Identity has become the goal of our postmodern investigations, and while this has been enormously useful to rethink our relationship to sometimes oppressive traditions, increasingly it is our own identity, not that of others, we seek to know. The knee-jerk reaction to this individualism, however, provides inadequate criticism since it too often elides the important responsibility of recognizing difference. As Harvard literary critic Doris Sommer (1999) recently argued, to fail to be sensitive to differences in the interest of forging democratic unity “is hardly to promote a liberal education” (p. 4). “If there were no difference,” she notes, there could be no recognition of one subject by another, but only the kind of identification that reduces real external others into functions of a totalizing self. Yet the gap that allows for enough autonomy to make mutuality possible also risks misrecognition and violence. The risk is worth taking, because without it we allow the violence of forcing sameness on others: either they are forced to fit in or they are forced out. (p. 3)

But the risk is also that such focus on particularism will cause us to shrink from the challenge of identifying any form of language or values that can forge meaningful community among disparate people. And this has certainly been the fruit of recent critical practices in the humanities: teaching students it is a greater sin to falsely identify and understand others than to remain inert in the face of need or suffering. Consequently, we are led to believe that it is a moral victory simply to point out the hypocrisy of those who have tried to act. Indeed, empathy and compassion have become bywords for arrogant presumption in our day. This reduces our ethical life in a rather facile manner to mere cognition; the complexities and challenges of acting in the world can be avoided as long as one possesses the right thoughts.

A conception of the humanities is needed that simultaneously accounts for particularism and promotes action in the community interest. When we engage our critical thinking regarding a particular form of expression from a particular individual, culture, and historical moment — as the humanities teach us — we learn to balance particularity with universality, so that one does not override the other. Otherwise we learn nothing new. If the experience
of another person proves so radically particular that it shares nothing with other human beings in other times and places, then it is condemned to meaninglessness. But if it is only appreciated for its capacity to tell us something we already knew about ourselves, then we have simply obliterated the need for conversation with other human beings in circumstances different from our own. Both of these tendencies have dangerous implications in a democracy. If we do not learn to appreciate difference without reducing it to sameness or perpetual otherness, then it seems unlikely that we can learn to form communities where differences are both protected and transcended. Worse yet, if we believe these ethical dilemmas are merely cognitive matters that only concern a community of thinkers — without requiring any immediate relation to action outside that community — then it makes little ethical difference whether we emphasize universalism or particularism. One interesting example of this kind of cognitive insularity is found in Levine et al.’s 1989 response to Cheney’s aforementioned report. The 1988 report by Cheney complained that academic specialization was causing the public to seek humanities education outside the academy in “parallel schools” of museums, humanities councils, and libraries. Levine et al., who are all professors and directors of interdisciplinary humanities centers, explain that while the highly specialized language of humanistic research might alienate the public, they believe there are promising signs of interdisciplinary work in the humanities that are beginning to break down some of the jargon because of the need to communicate across the disciplines. Oddly, they never once mention the public in this defense. Instead they say, “Scholarly communities are in the midst of developing contexts where faculty and graduate students from different specialties can exchange ideas and then develop the larger implications of their research” (1989, p. A12). They point to conversations with graduate students and other faculty in diverse disciplines as evidence that they are speaking in a publicly accessible way. They conclude that

The objects that interest us are in general accessible to a non-specialized public, which is frequently also ourselves [emphasis added], as we move from one field to another: literary critics look at paintings or read history or philosophy, and philosophers or art critics study literary works. (p. A12)

The unabashedly narcissistic qualities of this argument are almost endearing.

To be clear, if the humanities matter at all it is because they shape our imagination, and habits of mind in turn shape our actions. Octavio Paz (1990), the Mexican poet and Nobel Laureate, once said that in its metaphorical work of placing “contrary or divergent realities in relationship” the poem was a mirror of the fraternity of the cosmos—a model of what human society might be. In the face of the destruction of nature, it offers living proof of the brotherhood of the stars and elementary particles of chemicals and consciousness. Poetry, exercising our imagination, teaches us to recognize differences and discover similarities. (p. 158)

In this sense, “poetry is the antidote to technology and the market” (p. 159). That is, poetry, like all art, teaches us to see meaningful relationships between differences without underestimating them or reducing other people and other values to mere commodities. Metaphorical work exemplifies how we can embrace without conditioning, and paradoxically without disregarding, value and particular meaning. Tragically, so much metaphorical work — whether fiction, poetry, or painting — is itself either reduced to a commodified value or, worse, banished from the market altogether.

But what defines this embrace? How can poetry, or the humanities generally, shape us ethically if they merely attend to the conceptual self? Paz is movingly forceful about the modern world’s desperate need for poetry, but is it merely romantic rhetoric to suggest that poetry can save the world? His idealism is only worth defending if we accept the challenge to learn how to transition being poetry lovers to forging those social relations that can hold communities together as beautifully as a poet’s metaphors. If there is any truth at all to the word, as St. James once reminded us, it must depend on the actions we take in response to hearing it; we must be doers as well as hearers of the word. Otherwise, even if the word is true and beautiful, it will deceive us because it will become a mere image of what we believe we have already become. He writes:

For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass. For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgettest what manner of man he was. (James 1:23-24)

So if we are going to defend the humanities, we must focus on how to make that transition: from cognition, to action and service. Otherwise, the greatest risk is not misrecognition of others, but of our own ethical worth.

The humanities cannot be protected against the forces of the market and serve their purpose with-
In sum, what Lewis and Paz both imply is that the humanities allow us to forge ahead in the project of building community, while fostering a healthy sense of individual autonomy and particularity. The key is to understand the relationship Lewis invokes between the cognitive activity of aesthetic experience and moral action. Until we attempt to transform experiences of ideas and the arts into community actions by our students, there is little hope that they will learn the habits of life-long learning. We must do more than inspire appreciation for arts and ideas (though, given our cultural climate, this is alone a formidable task); we must demonstrate the relevance of course materials to the surrounding community life. We must remind students that when they are studying Ibsen or Chekhov, they are also studying what was part of their lives when they went to the community theater as a child, or participated in a church or school play. They need to be reminded that they use judgments related to dramatic performance, or abandon judgment altogether, every time they rent a video or watch television. They need to see that the humanities can be communal events, acts of communication that become meaningful precisely because they happen in a community. Poetry, essay, and story; history, philosophy, and religious thought; painting, music, dancing, and sculpture are all profoundly social and communal in their value unless they are increasingly reduced to a demand for cultural literacy or simply to the demands of an obligatory general education in the university classroom. In either case, they become nothing more than rites of individual educational passage, not rites of community building.

For these reasons, what is needed is a curriculum demonstrating that the humanities’ value extends from the individual contemplation of literature and the arts — an event that typically occurs mainly in our classrooms and less frequently in our own homes — to the surrounding society in community venues across classes, ethnicities, religions, etc. This pedagogy must begin with the professors themselves proving to be more than mere experts of their disciplines. William Bennett (1981) has been more convincing on this subject when not worrying so much about cultural literacy but emphasizing that

What we need is a few more good men and women who...will accept the always present public invitation, who will write good books, do well-considered and directed research that will put good ideas into circulation, and who, most important of all, will teach what the humanities can do, not merely by proclaiming what they can do, but by doing it. (p. 200)
Similarly, the Commission on the Humanities (1980) recommended over 20 years ago that

Undergraduate curricula in the humanities should include cooperative ventures with local cultural institutions....Not all colleges and universities have access to a major museum or cultural institution, but many will find unsuspected treasures in their own backyards:...a local history organization or library with resources for historical research; a theater where students can see or perform dramatic literature. (p. 77)

There is little evidence that we have sufficiently heeded this recommendation. The 1997 report by the President’s Committee essentially repeated this call for university faculty and curricula to extend beyond the classroom. The report recommended government partnerships that will “[improve] instruction in the arts and humanities by encouraging colleges, universities and cultural organizations to cooperate with local school systems,” and “provide incentives to college and university faculty to develop collaborations with school teachers, educational administrators, and artists” (p. 13). It is noted that “as part of the non-profit sector, cultural organizations will never earn enough money to cover all their expenses” (p. 5). This means that such organizations will always be caught in a complex and interdependent web of private donations, government support, and curricular coordination. For this reason, it is particularly alarming — the Committee argues — that the richest are giving less, that an ethic of philanthropy is dying, and that the public role of the humanist has decreased (p. 6, 18). They remind the President that “giving and volunteering are closely linked. Individuals who volunteer time and services are much more likely to give, and give more on average than do non-volunteers,” therefore “the ethic of giving...must be taught by families and by charitable, educational, and religious institutions. Tax and other incentives reinforce, but cannot replace, a basic sense of individual responsibility to the community” (p. 21). Even within the service-learning movement that is so determined to establish bridges between universities and their surrounding communities, one is hard pressed to find many models of programs in the humanities designed to meet this challenge.

**Humanities and Service-Learning**

It is perhaps those situations, digging for the “unsuspected treasures,” that will yield the greatest benefits for both professors and students. A service-learning curriculum that establishes such contact with local organizations accomplishes several goals:

- Teaching students that there is a vitality to the arts in community life, and most importantly, in the very places where they reside;
- Demonstrating how community arts organizations perform in practice what theory teaches: that the arts can affect all sectors of society, forging a sense of both individual and community identity, potentially without erasing differences;
- Exposing the often sad fact that arts organizations have desperate needs, are vulnerable to fiscal and political pressures, and need volunteers. This, in turn, fosters a sense of citizenship, duty, and desire for service, and a concrete understanding of what kind of advocacy the arts need;
- Providing experiential evidence that the life of the imagination begins at the level of material considerations before it can then transcend them (i.e., doing “grunt work” on behalf of the arts is sometimes a humbling necessity);
- Establishing relationships between students and the many interesting and inspiring volunteers who are often underpaid, yet work hard to support their cause. In other words, students learn from role models who allow their lives to follow their passions rather than follow purely economic concerns. These are models of success that contrast with those offered in the media or business world. Students also see examples of how others successfully integrate the humanities into their lives after graduating, regardless of their particular career paths. They see that the humanities do not necessarily have to be a matter of professional choice;
- Establishing relationships between professors and leaders in the community, thereby bridging boundaries between the university and the surrounding community. Professors gain greater awareness of community context regarding their expertise, thereby empowering them to seek ways to bring ideas to, and from, the community.

Brigham Young University (BYU), a private institution of 30,000 students, owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), recently began developing many service-learning courses in many fields. I wish to briefly highlight a recent experiment in the humanities. BYU has an undergraduate major and a Masters program in the humanities integrating a study of the various arts. Students are drawn to this
major in significant numbers. Currently there are approximately 400 majors and many minors. Majors are required to take a series of courses within the department integrating the arts in some way, but also are required to seek a discipline of emphasis such as music, art history, comparative literature, philosophy, English, history, etc. Students take a variety of integrated humanities classes currently covering the diverse traditions, ideas, and peoples of Western culture (a two semester sequence, variations of which are also required of all undergraduates at BYU), American culture, and the cultures of Asia and Latin America. They are also taught aesthetic theory basics and exposed to a variety of senior seminar topics that rotate according to the professors’ expertise. Such seminar topics include, for example, Postmodern Culture, Women in the Eighteenth Century, Native Americans in Art, The Victorian Era, Slavery in the Americas, and others.

BYU humanities majors typically suffer the worst anxieties of those drawn to the liberal arts. They love ideas and debate and are fascinated by the range of cultural expressions, but have little idea of what to do after graduating. While many intend to pursue graduate study in the humanities, most remain undecided. To help students find more practical applications for their major, the department recently instituted an internship program to encourage students to seek related work experience. Most frequently, this involves working at a major institution like the Smithsonian in Washington or other organizations in major metropolitan areas. But students have largely ignored the local Utah Valley community, 40 miles south of Salt Lake City.

Students at BYU generally share the rather dismissive attitudes toward the local community typical of undergraduates at many private schools. Many do not anticipate living in the area (although the population in the Valley continues to grow and includes many alumni of the University) and, especially if they are from out of state (only 32% come from within Utah), tend to scoff at the idea. BYU (and the neighboring Utah Valley State College) generates numerous cultural events and is largely a self-sustaining community, but is clearly interested in providing educational opportunities for the community at large. Because of their intense social, academic, and religious schedules, students usually know little about, or show little interest in, the local arts organizations and other extra-curricular learning institutions. The danger, then, is that students take humanities classes because of the major’s structures and the general education requirements, but will never learn about how the “unsuspected treasures” of the arts in our own backyard contribute to, and are sustained by, the community. This is particularly problematic given the predominance of members of the Latter-day Saints (LDS) churches in the area and student body; it is all too easy to ignore the increasing Latino presence, for example, throughout the Valley, and the contributions of other religious communities. More generally, students must learn to dig in and respect the places where they study, resisting the pervasive life-is-elsewhere logic of Western colonialism. We must move beyond the conscious or implicit assumptions that civilization only really exists in major metropolitan centers, and that “culture” is defined by a symphony hall, a major museum featuring works by the great European artists, a corps of nationally recognized local writers, or a citizenry of predominantly European origin.

It has been obvious for some time that students in our humanities program at BYU needed a course that would more directly approach the world beyond the classroom and explore ways to apply the humanities after graduation. Because there was no room in our curriculum yet for such a course, I was encouraged by my colleagues in my desire to develop a senior seminar entitled “Citizenship and the Humanities,” requiring service to local community arts organizations. The reading list consisted of books that explore the current state of affairs concerning humanities in our culture — from highly theoretical to highly practical (including many of the references used in this article, a mix of writings by practical, public humanists, and artists, theorists, and poets). Prior to the beginning of the semester, I contacted many of the leading local arts organizations, including the Provo City Arts Council, the Utah Arts Council, the Utah Humanities Council, the BYU Museum of Art, the Springville Art Museum, the Utah State Historical Society, and others. Funds at the newly formed Jacobsen Center for Service and Learning on campus provided me with a student assistant to aid me in this work. My initial intention was to learn more about the organizations and their needs, preparing groundwork for a possible formal student service experience. Since our students are so varied in their interests, I wanted to keep the options wide open for them. Once the semester began, I had a group of 12 students and was able to provide individually-designed opportunities for service. One of the greatest benefits of this community outreach was the opportunity to invite several inspirational members of the community to our class for intense question-and-answer sessions. Visitors included members of some of the aforementioned local arts
organizations, and the director of BYU’s Museum of Art. Precisely because of the reasons outlined earlier, the inspiration and education that these individuals provided to my students and me were indispensable.

Each service project required the students to do 24-30 hours of service for a local arts organization. They were also required to research the organization’s history, make a thorough presentation of their research and the nature of their service to the class, and write a final report demonstrating the relationship between their experience, the theoretical readings from the semester, and the value of the humanities in community life.

There have been many successful experiences. One student is preparing a master’s thesis on public art and its role in the definition of community. She worked with the director of public art in the city of Ogden. Ogden recently passed an ordinance dictating that one percent of all building costs must go toward public art, causing significant opposition within the city and statewide, and subsequent vigilance and education by concerned citizens. This student was asked to write proposals for, and to catalogue slides of, public art throughout the country as successful examples. The Executive Director of Ogden City Arts sensed the mutual benefit of this service: “While this was enormously helpful to me, it gave her an opportunity to see a large number of public art projects.” The student also put together a brochure advertising the city’s current public art and helped strengthen its legislation of funds by applying for federal funds. (At present, the ordinance only applies to state projects paid for by state funds.) This project is vital to the Ogden community’s quality of life, and the student’s work helped bolster a rather outnumbered minority. The student wrote to me: “By interacting with members of the professional field addressed in my academic work I saw how my thesis could realistically address some of the issues (both theoretical and tangible) concerned with public art and its administration.”

Another pair of students, both undergraduates, teamed up to serve the local Utah Baroque Ensemble, a group working to raise money for an invited trip to Germany this summer. They wrote grant proposals for the group, created a much-needed Web page, and videotaped rehearsals and interviews with its members for publicity. One significant result of this service has been the Ensemble’s creation of guidelines for working with future volunteer students to help with ongoing needs for publicity, community outreach, and grant writing. That is, the organization now anticipates working with student volunteers in the future.

One student worked for the Center for Documentary Arts in Salt Lake City, an organization dedicated to preserving and telling the stories of those on the margins of a predominantly LDS (Mormon) population. While the director was hesitant, perhaps even a bit suspicious of our motivations — initially only allowing the student to paint bookshelves and do other physical work — he eventually came to trust the student and offer him a full-time research position. This was a small but telling step to help heal some of the wounds in an oftentimes religiously-divided community.

Gary Daynes, a colleague in BYU’s history department, initiated another community building effort in the humanities. He recently taught a service-learning course in Methods of Historical Research, enlisting his entire class to preserve a local Catholic parish’s history that has for generations been surrounded by the LDS community and that, for other reasons, had to abandon an historical building. They documented the parish building that was going to be evacuated, took oral histories of Catholics in the area, and provided the parish with its own written history of bilingual pamphlets for members, a Web site, and a formal archive.

Another student worked with a local elementary school to develop a poetry writing class, attracting several Latino students from among a predominantly Anglo population. These students were significantly empowered by the experience. Two of the elementary students were invited to our class to read their poetry, instilling them with added confidence in their abilities. Because of my student’s efforts, the school became aware for the first time of a national poetry contest, and he helped to create the school’s first poetry contest (two of his students were subsequent winners). The elementary students were effusive in their praise and gratitude for this experience.

Still another pair of students worked at an afternoon school program for largely disadvantaged students. They met once a week with a large group of after-school students and provided educational experiences related to the arts. In the words of the coordinator of the Afterschool Homework Lab, they experienced “eye-opening” challenges in trying to communicate as Anglos to a large group of Hispanic children. The school now anticipates creating a more formal program with BYU with the hopes that as “these children develop their appreciation for the humanities, perhaps they will grow enough to actually present their own works to family and friends in a formal setting.”

In all of these experiences, as in most service-learning settings, my students experienced gaps between their rather vague and unformed universal yearnings and the particulars of people concerned
with specific educational and cultural objectives. And in encountering these differences, they were required to make necessary adjustments, to think more humbly about why they believed in the arts’ universal value, and to concern themselves with those particularities with more focused and patient listening. One student commented: “The service-learning aspect provided me with an opportunity I would not have taken the initiative to do. I understand the application of the humanities better.” Another wrote: “It is a great combination of ‘book’ learning and ‘experience’ learning. The ideas and theories we discussed have been made relevant in my studies as well as my life.” Still another concluded: “I am a pro-active humanist now.” In their final papers, most commented on a sense of incompleteness regarding their ambitions and goals for the organizations they served. In each case, this was instructive, helping to instill a desire for further service in the humanities. Several students began initiatives to continue their service beyond that semester, and in this sense I believe the objectives of both a humanities education and service-learning were met. As one student commented, the lessons of the experience had “many life applications that have affected all of my learning.”

Clearly this course is not yet sufficient to change the many problems mentioned, but it is a step in the right direction, and it has been as important for my students as it has been for me in helping us to rethink our mutual responsibilities as citizens and students of the humanities. As a result of this experience, which I am committed to duplicate in other humanities courses I teach, my passion for the humanities feels less self-interested. I am less guided by professional concerns related to scholarship expectations. While important, these concerns tend to inhibit scholars from going beyond the narrow reach of their disciplines, and classrooms. While I still believe scholars need to be firmly rooted in a discipline and I would not want to condone intellectual or scholarly weakness just because service-learning is a noble idea, I now appreciate the need to occasionally wander into someone else’s backyard to gain new perspectives. It is wise to remember that the humanities do not belong to me but to throngs of human communities across the globe. It is helpful for humanities professors to occasionally pull themselves out of their respective disciplines, centuries, or countries of specialization and recognize the tremendous threads of commonality that unite what we do. Because of the inherently self-centering nature of cognitive, critical work, we have to be frequently reminded that we do not own culture just because we love it, and that we must avoid assuming the role of the ‘anthropologist out among the folk’ when we step outside the academy.

Admittedly, there is some truth to the stereotype of the humanities professor who has chosen to teach because there is not much else she or he can do. The problem is, we are the ones who set the example of the humanities’ relevance to life. We can scarcely expect to train our humanities students to embrace their role as citizens without some risky and self-exposing retrofitting of our own. While any community service might be useful in humanities classes and should be pursued, it is ideal if the students render service to the life of ideas in their communities so that they can understand the power of the humanities to forge community; we come together as communities not simply in the cognitive work of interpretation and criticism of arts and ideas but also as a result of physical work on behalf of their livelihood in our immediate environments. And because it is the livelihood of the humanities that we mutually support, we are at the same time in a position to reflect upon and learn from our distinct differences. What is needed, then, is a more committed form of humanistic study devoted to the well being of the world beyond the classroom and a new vision of what it means to be a scholar. I like what Charles Frankel (1981) said: “When humanistic scholars have been persuaded that they really are part of the larger community they have also made the largest contributions to their own disciplines” (p. 15). Hopefully there will always be a place in our society and in our individual lives for quiet, solitary contemplation in the library, in front of a book or a pad of paper. That critical judgment is never an asocial activity and that service to others always relates to one’s capacity for critical judgment is most apparent in the context of humanistic community service. The emphasis in this way is no longer on what to think or what to know but on how to act upon what we think we understand.

References


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