INTEGRATING WRITING, ACADEMIC DISCOURSES, AND SERVICE LEARNING: PROJECT RENAISSANCE AND SCHOOL/ COLLEGE LITERACY COLLABORATIONS

Dewey seems to have felt that reforms in early education could be in themselves a major lever of social change. They could lead the way to a more just and free society, a society in which in his words, “The ultimate aim of production is not production of goods, but the production of free human beings associated with one another on terms of equality.”

Noam Chomsky, “Democracy and Education”

Recent trends in Composition Studies and service learning have urged instructors to help students make connections between their course material and the world at large. Rather than functioning as deliverers of purely “factual” knowledge, teachers have been called upon to use service learning in order to help students actively and critically engage with academic material and connect it to lived experiences outside the classroom. Grounding abstract academic knowledge in experience helps the learner engage the material on multiple levels, including both the affective and the intellectual. In

Lisa Mastrangelo is an associate professor of English and coordinator of Women’s Studies at the College of St. Elizabeth. She teaches a variety of courses in composition, playwriting, rhetoric, and women’s studies. Her recent publications have appeared in Rhetoric Review and Reflections.

An associate professor of English at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, Victoria Tischio directs the University Writing Center and the Learning Communities Program. She teaches a variety of graduate and undergraduate courses in Composition and Rhetoric, critical pedagogy, and film. She is a frequent presenter at CCCC and Feminisms and Rhetorics, and her recent publications have appeared in Composition Studies, JAC, and WPA.

Composition Studies, Volume 33, Number 1, Spring 2005
this way, learning is not kept at arm’s length, but is given personal and social significance through the student’s experience of its relevance to actual social contexts, or what students refer to as “real life.” Recent educational research also indicates that service learning is an excellent vehicle for integrating academic knowledges with experience; service learning brings together multiple intellectual and social activities in order to provide students with a more substantial learning experience. In “Service-Learning in Today’s Higher Education,” Barbara Jacoby points out that much educational research indicates that “we learn through combinations of thought and action, reflection and practice, theory and application” (6-7). However, many educational theorists note that the experiential aspect of service learning programs isn’t enough to support learning on its own; instead, according to Jacoby, such programs should assist learners in reflecting on their connectedness to “historical, sociological, cultural, economic, and political contexts” (7). This reflection helps students develop broader perspectives that extend beyond their own immediate experiences as students and as consumers of American culture. Or, as Bruce Herzberg indicates in his landmark article “Community Service and Critical Teaching,” successful service learning enables “students to transcend their own deeply-ingrained belief in individualism” and meritocracy, helping them perceive the ways their lives are connected with and dependent upon the lives of those around them (312).

When we began a year-long service learning project as part of a pilot interdisciplinary program (called “Project Renaissance”) for first-year students at The University at Albany, SUNY, our work was informed by these principles for service learning. Our goals included assisting students in grounding disciplinary knowledges in lived experience and encouraging students to see themselves as effective actors in a social context that extends beyond their individual lives. Thus, in keeping with Chomsky’s comments above, our goals were both educational and social. We also learned a number of things about service learning that extended beyond our initial assumptions about its value in higher education. Our experiences confirm that reciprocity is an essential component of “learning” in service projects, both for the students doing the “serving” and the community being “served.” The value of experience for grounding complex and often abstract disciplinary concepts was also reaffirmed through this project. We had, naively, expected that service learning might bring about a faster and greater transformation in students’ perceptions of themselves and their relationships to broader social, intellectual, and biological communities, and found that such radical transformations come more slowly and unevenly than we had hoped. To our surprise, however, we discovered that service learning created a grounding point for the educational goals of Project Renaissance, bringing greater intellectual coherence to this multidisciplinary program than might have been achieved otherwise. What we present, then,
is not an “ideal case,” but, instead, a reflection on the lived experiences of an actual service learning project—messy and inconsistent but valuable, nonetheless, for the ways in which it enabled us to refine and rearticulate the principles of service learning in higher education. As Composition specialists, we were most pleased by the changes we witnessed in our students’ attitudes about the nature of literacy. Over the course of the year-long service learning project, our students shifted from viewing literacy through the framework of “functional literacy” to seeing literacy as a more complex, socially derived ability that individuals develop unevenly, depending upon a variety of social and personal factors. Although changes in writing abilities emerge slowly, making it difficult to measure large changes over short periods of time, we did see some evidence that the college students grew as writers as they demonstrated greater rhetorical sensitivity and facility with certain conventions of academic writing. Although, in hindsight, there are numerous details of this service learning project we could have handled more effectively, we take the time here to chronicle this project because we believe it reveals much about the steps that are necessary to move college students from seeing writing as an empty educational exercise to seeing it as a dynamic and engaging social ability.

Two main themes guided our work in Project Renaissance and, thus, feature prominently in this article. One important concept is embedded in the view of service learning we enacted in the program. While the students first understood service learning as being the equivalent of volunteerism, we worked with students toward developing a more complex view of service learning based not on “charity” (as with volunteerism), but on “reciprocity” as its central tenet. Even though we consistently presented the project in this way, it took time (or, more precisely, experience) for the college students to see the reciprocal nature of service learning as valuable. Additionally, integrating service learning with reflective and academic reading and writing assignments and with study of three different disciplinary areas (biology, sociology, and philosophy) helped students see how academic knowledge can be put to work in actual social contexts, bringing the ivory tower and lived experience a little closer together. However, this connection also took time; in fact, it really wasn’t until the second semester of the project that we actually witnessed the students putting specific disciplinary knowledges to work to understand the nature of their service learning experiences. Here, writing assignments played a pivotal role in encouraging the students to work through their experiences in finer detail and to interpret those details through disciplinary lenses. Over time, the SUNY students began to see that the benefits of service learning can flow in multiple directions, both to the community and back to their own classrooms.

In an effort to create a coherent service learning experience for our students, a pen pal project with a group of elementary school students from a
local school district was the main ongoing activity throughout the school year that cemented academic study, writing, research, and service into an integrated whole. The college students recognized the benefits of this pen pal project in the form of modeling writing behaviors and providing the elementary students with college-student role models early on. The importance of these benefits was not lost on the SUNY students, who were well aware that their pen pals came from an underperforming urban school district, where few students go to college. Later, they came to see benefits for themselves, in that the pen pal project added “real life” significance to the concepts they studied in the academic modules (such as the connection between nutrition and intellectual development in biology; the effects of economic stratification on individual achievement in sociology; and the theoretical underpinnings of specific educational policies and social values in philosophy) that deepened both their academic and their service learning experiences, making both more rewarding.

As representatives of English teaching in this multidisciplinary program, we were especially interested in the potential this service project held related to literacy learning and acquisition for both the elementary and college students. The college students arrived at Project Renaissance with fairly entrenched, yet largely unexamined, assumptions about how people become literate. They assumed, as many people do, that formal instruction in the rules of written discourse produces literacy: the better you learn the rules, the more literate you are, so to speak. Contrary to this commonsense notion of literacy learning, the service learning project exposed our students to alternative views of literacy and demonstrated for them that literacy is in large part acquired through an individual’s participation with literate communities. They came to recognize this fact largely through witnessing the impact that their letters were having on their pen pals’ writing. Based on evidence in the SUNY students’ final course reflections and research papers, we also feel that many of the students developed an expanded sense of their connectedness with larger social contexts and a greater appreciation for the value of academic learning. Over the course of the two semesters, the college students demonstrated a greater desire to respond sensitively to their pen pals, an increased willingness to see the “picture-writing” of some of the youngest writers as significant text, and a new interest in using knowledge acquired through academic study to make sense of their experiences with their pen pals. In terms more familiar to Composition Studies, the college students developed greater rhetorical sensitivity, expanded their genre awareness, and acquired some of the conventions of academic discourse.

* * *

34 Composition Studies
The arguments in favor of service learning are persuasive, and many colleges and universities have responded to this call. In 1996, the University at Albany began an elective program for first-year students called “Project Renaissance.” Project Renaissance is a year-long, interdisciplinary course sequence, which aims at increasing retention by offering students a “small-college” experience at a large university and, as a result, easing the transition into university life. The program also includes significant technology and service learning components, and all of the courses are writing intensive. During our tenure in Project Renaissance, the courses were team taught by three tenured faculty and three graduate students (working as “preceptors”) from a variety of different disciplines; we held positions as preceptors in the program. There were three teams, each accommodating 100 undergraduates. Faculty from across the university volunteered to participate in the program. During the year addressed in this article (1997-98), we worked with a biologist, a sociologist, and a philosopher who were responsible for delivering disciplinary content in the program. All three preceptors were graduate students. We were from English; the third preceptor was from Philosophy. Although each team configured itself differently (allotting more or less time to lectures, including field trips, assigning different tasks to preceptors, designing different service learning projects, etc.), in general the three faculty designed lectures and corresponding assignments and exams in their fields and participated periodically in discussion groups on topics relevant to their lectures. As preceptors, our responsibilities included designing syllabi and lessons for the discussion sections (33 students in each section); assigning, teaching, and grading all writing; providing study support for the lecture sections; and modeling engaged learning by preparing for and participating in the lecture sections. Generally, the preceptors were responsible for bringing coherence to the program by making connections among the different disciplines and between the academic work and other components of the program. We also shouldered most of the responsibility for writing instruction and acted as liaisons between the students and the faculty. Most relevant to this discussion, however, were our duties overseeing service learning experiences and helping students reflect on them through discussion and writing. We worked directly with both Project Renaissance’s Service Learning Coordinator and a group of local elementary school teachers to design the service learning experience, the centerpiece of which was a pen pal project.

It is from our experiences as preceptors that we gathered our evidence and have drawn our conclusions about the effectiveness of this program at assisting student writers in becoming more aware of audience, understanding the literacy acquisition process, and learning the importance of text as a mode of social interaction. We also feel that the service learning project was the component of Project Renaissance that enabled the students to combine inquiry and
action and engage in critical disciplinary learning. It was the service learning project that encouraged the students to take ownership of the information that they acquired through readings, lectures, and discipline-focused assignments and use it for their own purposes—to understand the nature of the inequities that were having a negative influence on the lives of the young pen pals they had grown attached to over the year. Overall, the service learning experience grounded both the abstract disciplinary concepts of the biology, sociology, and philosophy modules and the conventions of writing in a lived context that gave the college students a compelling reason to engage in a more critical mode of learning than they might have otherwise. In short, service learning, in our opinions, is what made the program work.

Unfortunately, despite the benefits of service learning, students don’t always welcome these opportunities to work with the community. Initially, our students voiced some resistance to the very concept of service learning, seeing it as an imposition on their time and, in some cases, on their values. Mostly, they saw it as a form of busy work that would be more beneficial for the university’s image than for their experiences as students. They enacted their discomfort with these new ideas and approaches to learning by resisting their coursework. They complained about their readings and avoided their writing assignments. They whined and moaned. On occasions, they were downright unpleasant to teach as they would refuse to speak during discussion classes or, worse, would lash out at us with their complaints. As preceptors, we heard the majority of their complaints because of our close proximity to the students. We were both available and approachable. We attempted to run interference for the faculty and program administrators whenever possible. But as Shakespeare’s character Pandarus demonstrates, the go-between rarely fares well in the interaction. However, our close proximity with the students also had benefits because it put us in a position to witness the college students’ learning process—their reactions and reflections—as they simultaneously engaged the academic material and the service work—work which, at first, seemed to be pulling them in opposite directions.

Their initial reaction to the service learning component was in part a result of their demographics. SUNY-Albany’s students come largely from the wealthy suburbs of New York City. Many arrived at the University with the firm belief that they earned the privilege (really, understood more of as a “right”) to attend one of the state’s flagship public universities by virtue of their own hard work and innate intelligence alone. For the most part, these students had little cause to ponder the nature of education in the U.S.—its purposes, goals, and roles in the culture—because they felt secure about their future prospects. Nor had they had many opportunities to question the nature of literacy: What is it? Who decides when you have it? What potential influence does literacy
have on one’s goals and opportunities? What kinds of literacies are valued in different contexts? As mentioned earlier, the students came to us holding fast to a largely functionalist view of literacy (the ability to read, write, and function in a print-based society is obtained through acquisition of the basic rules for writing and speaking), but we also wanted our students to understand the material consequences of this seemingly innocuous concept. We wanted them to understand the distinction between the passive acquisition of literacy and the active process of learning, as well as the different ways in which these concepts are valued. We wanted our students to appreciate the role that literacy plays in oppressing and liberating individuals (Stuckey). Powerful literacy, as our students came to see, involves both acquisition and learning (Gee 542). This kind of reflection on epistemological questions was at the core of learning in Project Renaissance and was a key component of the service learning in which our students engaged. However, students did not readily take to this kind of questioning until the value of the answers we sought became clearer in the influences these issues might have on the lives of their pen pals.

We also discovered a conflict between ourselves and the students in regards to the very definition of “service.” Service to them meant more of what Joe Mertz calls “guerilla service”—short-term neighborhood cleanups and visits to soup kitchens and homeless shelters (Mertz). But such approaches to service learning can be exploitative rather than reciprocal and allow students to retain their liberal idealism: a view of themselves as superior and the belief that helping those “less fortunate” than themselves for a few hours makes a significant difference. We attempted to avoid this by designing a long-term project with specific goals, working in particular towards “embedding personal and social consciousness in academic work” (Flower 181). We wanted the students to critique and question their own subject positions as well as the inequities that they saw. As many a veteran critical pedagogue knows, this kind of critical self-reflectiveness is difficult for students to achieve.

In keeping with the philosophies of critical teaching and service learning, the academic modules (as they were called) asked the Project Renaissance students to see themselves not as “private” individuals, but as part of a complex social, intellectual, and biological network. In biology, students were asked to examine their connectedness to the ecosystem through the world food market. For instance, they considered how their own food consumption choices affect the availability of food around the world. In sociology, students were asked to consider their social relationships by examining demographics available through the U.S. Census Bureau relating to gender, race, class, educational achievement, and income. In philosophy, students questioned foundational social concepts such as truth and justice and faced difficult questions like what it would take to create a just society. This questioning of received knowledge caused some
discomfort for the students, who were being asked to reflect on hegemonic concepts about individuality, opportunity, freedom, and democracy (Herzberg, “Community Service” 312). Nonetheless, this type of critical reflection, according to Robert Coles, is consistent with the “very purpose . . . of colleges and universities,” which he describes as “help[ing] one generation after another grow intellectually and morally through study and the self-scrutiny such study can sometimes prompt” (48). Thus, the academic components of the course, although not following the service learning project step for step, prodded the students into questioning received knowledge about how U.S. society works, which deepened the benefits of the service learning experience by helping the SUNY students understand what they were seeing in the differences between their lives and opportunities and those of their pen pals. Thus, we came to see the relationship between the academic modules and the service learning project as reciprocal, for while the service learning experience grounded the abstract concepts of the academic modules, the academic modules added much-needed contextualization to the service learning experience. However, the interconnectedness of learning in the academic modules and the pen pal project was not immediately apparent; instead, the connections (and the students’ appreciation of what they were learning) accrued over time, emerging most noticeably in the second semester. Initially, the students perceived their learning in the academic modules as esoteric and unnecessarily rigorous; they complained that the program had breached its promise to ease their transitions into university life.

Despite their initial reactions and their discomfort with some of their learning experiences in Project Renaissance, once the service learning project was fully underway, it was the one aspect of the program the students did not particularly complain about. In part, this was because of the model we had chosen. Thomas Deans, in Writing Partnerships, describes what he feels are the three dominant models of service learning, specifically in relation to composition. The first two include those models committed to writing about a community and those designed to write for a community. We chose his third, more-integrated model and worked to design a project where our students would write with a community (15). In keeping with this, our students were assigned kindergarten, first, or second grade pen pals from a nearby local urban elementary school, which had a very low tax base and a large number of students receiving federal assistance in some form. In addition to the contrast in economic resources, the elementary school was also more ethnically diverse than many of the suburban schools the SUNY students had attended. Not atypically, the wealthy suburbs the college students came from had large numbers of college graduates and rather high income levels. In contrast, the urban community where the elementary school children lived had lower income
levels and a corresponding dearth of college-educated, adult role models. As a result, both the college and elementary students, alike, had to write across a number of social schisms related to age, economics, education, ethnicity, and culture, which created a challenging and rewarding discursive environment for both groups. In keeping with Deans’s model, our students wrote to their pen pals twice monthly and received letters just as often. Educators have long recognized that connecting lived experiences to the classroom enhances learning (Hilosky and Moore 143). Operating on the Deweyian notion that students will respond better to projects that they are interested in, the very human audience of small children induced our students to involve themselves in the project virtually without complaint. The letter exchanges remain one of the few instances in our teaching careers when a whole classroom of students repeatedly engaged cheerfully in a writing assignment.

At first, the pen pal project seemed extremely non-threatening to the college students. The elementary school children were “cute” and “friendly” and asked only for a little friendliness in return. During our first visit to their school in the fall semester, the elementary school students welcomed their college pen pals with smiles and hugs and led them around their classrooms by the hand, pointing out their projects, cubby holes, and desks. Their openness and affection were present in the letters the SUNY students received from their pen pals, which often closed with “Love” or “Your Friend.” Thus, while the academic modules were asking the college students to consider social and biological inequities and to critique cultural assumptions, the pen pals seemed to be asking only for friendship. This was easy for the college students to deliver. The SUNY students took quickly to stuffing their envelopes with presents for their pen pals, including stickers, crayons, and kazoos. The pen pals would respond in kind with colorful drawings of their bedrooms, families, and holiday wish lists. Both the elementary school children and the college students were highly motivated to write in this context, which was apparent for us in the college students’ willingness to engage unreservedly in this activity; the elementary school teachers reported similar enthusiasm on their end. Thus, the stage for literacy had been set through the use of context-dependent motivation.

While it is clear that the two groups of students were at very different stages in their developments as readers and writers, the SUNY students had become habituated to seeing writing as an empty, rule-driven activity, especially in educational settings. These attitudes were evidenced in a number of ways. First, in class discussions, they would say as much. Next, in conferences and revisions, they typically focused intently on correctness and gave far less attention to issues of genre and content, regardless of their actual difficulties with writing. These and other behaviors indicated to us that the college students were less engaged with writing as a meaning-making activity and more so
with it as a set of discrete skills. However, writing to their pen pals provided the more highly literate college students with an opportunity to revisit what makes writing exciting—having an audience that responds enthusiastically to the content of a text. What both groups of writers wanted was to forge a meaningful relationship through writing, which elevated the importance of content, genre, and style over correctness, formerly their overriding concern as writers. In other words, the college students began to see that it’s not the grammatical correctness that necessarily makes the child on the other end respond enthusiastically in her next letter; instead, it’s the overall effectiveness of the text at engaging the reader in a topic of mutual interest. This is a fundamental component of rhetorical sensitivity. By extending themselves “downward” as writers, the college students began to experience the degree to which they needed to develop greater rhetorical flexibility. Later in the year, we saw the college students extend themselves as writers into academic discourse as they attempted to use the intellectual tools of biology (particularly nutrition), sociology (especially demographics), and philosophy (primarily educational theories) to make sense of the inequities that were apparent between their own lives and those of their pen pals.

Together, the college students, disciplinary faculty, and preceptors witnessed that even in the more educationally advanced college students, literacy is still an evolving ability at multiple levels. From the perspective of college writing instruction, this renewed enthusiasm for writing helped energize the college students’ work on more academic writing projects, pushing their writing and thinking to more complex levels. This enthusiasm is apparent in some of the college students’ papers we quote from a little later in this article, where we see that their concern for the pen pals motivates their attempts to work carefully through some complicated disciplinary material. Under these conditions, it became clear that our students were engaging in reciprocal learning, where “[b]oth the server and those served teach, and both learn” (Jacoby 7).

Certainly, our students had as much to learn about the nature of literacy and learning from the elementary students as the elementary students did about college and education from the SUNY students. The lessons learned were numerous and included, for the college students, understanding that all texts are complex, including those written by children, and that literacy is both acquired and learned. These changes were evident in the willingness of the college students to work very hard at interpreting the often very cryptic texts produced by their pen pals and a corresponding willingness to use what at first seemed to be abstract and useless academic concepts to make sense out of social and economic differences between their lives and those of their pen pals. Although we didn’t work as closely with the elementary school students, some of what they learned was apparent in their letters and their interactions.
with our students. This included imitating both the form and style of the older students’ writing and learning what it might mean to attend college. Over the course of the year, we witnessed some specific changes in the elementary school students’ writing, including increased length and adherence to conventions of letter writing (such as opening salutations). Writing letters, for both the six-year-olds and the college students, seemed to inspire a new set of writing goals and motivations.

The pen pal project, of course, began long before the school year, when we met with the elementary school teachers, who were all members of the local chapter of the National Writing Project. Our goals for the elementary students were carefully laid out in a Learning Outcomes Proposal and were developed collaboratively with the teachers. The proposal listed the following preliminary goals for the children:

1. To develop a real reason to write.
2. To learn about the needs of an audience.
3. To develop motivation for reading and thinking about themes.
4. To develop a positive relationship to young adults.
5. To learn delayed gratification for work.

For the elementary school students, the pen pal project created a context beyond the confines of the classroom where literacy mattered. Potentially for the first time in their lives, these students saw that they could influence their social worlds through written words and images. They experienced the potential power that literacy carries.

In a sense, all of the same goals applied for the college students as well. Writing letters to their pen pals provided the college students with much needed opportunities to think about literacy development, including the relationship among rhetorical issues such as genre, topic, purpose, and audience. Most important to our students was the goal of developing motivation for literacy, which was intertwined with the goal of developing a non-academic reason to write for an audience outside the classroom. While it was technically an academic assignment, the students’ letters to their pen pals did not seem as such to them and, therefore, didn’t feel like a lot of the “pseudo-real-world” writing they are often asked to do. They often turned their letters in early, stuffed with presents and sometimes decorated. This, as any seasoned college teacher knows, is truly a sign of motivation, an important factor for engaged learning.

The other goals for the small children were not lost on our students, either. In particular, students worked to address the idea of audience because in so many ways, their pen pal audience was different from any other they had ever had. As Dean notes, “While the social turn in composition underscores
the need to encourage multicultural awareness and understanding in our classrooms, community-based writing takes the next logical step of asking students to cross cultural and class boundaries by collaborating with community partners who often inhabit subject positions different from those of the students” (9). As the elementary students thought about their audience of “college” students, our students struggled to respond to children who wrote about experiences very different from their own. One Project Renaissance student, for example, demonstrated her increasing awareness of audience as she struggled to respond appropriately to her pen pal, who wrote that her father had been taken to jail the night before. The Project Renaissance student recognized the difficulties inherent in the rhetorical situation she faced; she worked hard not to be patronizing in her letter, choosing to empathize rather than sympathize with an experience so far from her own. The student initially brought her pen pal’s letter to the attention of the class because she was unsure of how to respond. Through discussion, she began to see that her initial reaction (along the lines of “that’s horrible!”) was uninformed and unkind. As she discussed her response with her classmates, they helped her reflect on the biases embedded in her position that led her initially to judge her pen pal rather than empathize with her. Finally, she wrote that she, too, would be upset if her father had to go away. The compassion in her response is evident partly in the increased rhetorical sensitivity she displays and partly in her developing understanding of the overall social context the academic modules encouraged. She stopped and questioned her initial reaction, an intellectual act that the academic modules encouraged. This in turn enabled her to form a careful response rather than simply write back from an unexamined rhetorical and social position. In many senses, this is what is meant by revision—stepping back from a text, reassessing both the text and the underlying concepts and reactions that produced it, seeking advice from other writers, and making changes to the text to have a more desirable impact on the intended audience. The pen pal project and Project Renaissance curriculum fostered this kind of critical reflection on discourse practices, and encouraged students to take a more collaborative approach to their writing. Their developing intellectual curiosity about literacy and learning was evident in the students’ willingness to share their letters with each other and with us and in their comfort level with turning to the class for advice on writing them. They came to see the letters not as private exchanges between two individuals, but rather as public exchanges among two classrooms of students and their teachers. Their increasing reliance on their peers and preceptors to form a community of writers is also evidence that they were coming to see writing as a complex, meaning-making activity rather than a routine skill. Although this isn’t a strictly textual advance, we see these behaviors as marking a significant
shift in the students’ literate subjectivities and as an important part of their growth as writers.

Sometimes it was difficult for our students to understand exactly what they were learning from the pen pal project, where the discourse in use was not “academic” and their commitment seemed to come so easily. Write a letter; get one in response. It couldn’t be simpler. In order to help them better theorize the work they were doing as writers, we assigned them several chapters from Sondra Perl and Nancy Wilson’s work in *Through Teacher’s Eyes*. While some students still resisted the notion of literacy as constructed, the majority were astonished by what they were learning about the ways children learn to read and write and began to see that they had been taking their own literacy for granted. They began to see that functional literacy was a misleading concept. Instead, they recognized that literacy was not a basic skill, but an ever-developing set of complex verbal, textual, and social abilities that are difficult to acquire. The pen pal project and the formal contexts for learning that supported it also helped the Project Renaissance students explore the difficult Vygotskian notion that words and images are symbols that have meaning because we assign such meanings. This new understanding of literacy as complex was evident in a more informed approach to reading the writing of the youngest students, the pre-literate kindergarteners. The college students shifted from seeing scribbles and doodles on a page as the insignificant work of immature writers and artists to seeing them as part of complex literate texts. Our students began to develop techniques of interpretation, which is further evidence that they were coming to value them as meaningful text, as signs of literacy. The college students’ reading strategies included developing a familiarity with a writer’s lexicon of symbols/images across a group of letters and comparing texts produced by different letter writers to identify specific themes in the images. And because of the motivation toward literacy and textuality fostered by the pen pal project, the Project Renaissance students were willing to work very hard to make meaning from their pen pals’ texts. The college students who wrote to the youngest writers observed that the drawings they received from their kindergarten pen pals were, in fact, narratives about their lives and their dreams, as they painstakingly picked out identifiable images and developed a sense of the individual child’s iconography. This is a significant change because it marks a shift from seeing literacy as the equivalent of grammatical rules to understanding it through a broader, more complex social framework and from seeing literacy as learned through the study of abstract rules to seeing it as acquired from interactions in literate social contexts. One student remarked in a paper for the philosophy module that “these children are learning how to write letters by writing to the Project Renaissance students. They are learning sentence structures and other principles of English through this letter writing.” This student demonstrates a
growing awareness that the conventions of writing can actually be acquired by interacting with texts rather than just through memorization and worksheets. Although the college students were not applying these reading strategies to the published poetry of “great writers” or to understanding differences in various scholars’ interpretations of a major historical event, the college students were, nonetheless, developing an ability to interpret complex texts. In addition, they were increasing their repertoire of genres by coming to recognize that effective “writing” can take on numerous forms that look nothing like the five-paragraph theme. Although these abilities did not materialize primarily in academic reading and writing, but in reading and writing related to the pen pal project, we feel that these new interpretive and rhetorical strategies transferred to the college students’ academic writing as well.

The elementary school students benefited from this project as well. Their teachers responded enthusiastically and noted that their students were both enjoying it and learning from it. Their principal noted that the “students sharpened their language arts skills and enjoyed the individual attention provided by their pen pals” (“Troy Students” 1). Nor was ours a singular experience; similar results have been documented through other pen pal projects. One study, in particular, involved in-service teachers in a graduate education course and a class of first graders. Maria Ceprano and Elaine Garan, in their article entitled “Emerging Voices in a University Pen-Pal Project: Layers of Discovery in Action Research,” comment on the improvement in the first graders’ writing abilities throughout the project, something that we noticed as well. The teacher-researchers in Ceprano and Garan’s study plotted the first graders’ development in twelve categories, including use of pictures, spelling, syntax, initiation of topics, punctuation, and voice (38-39). The teacher-researchers noted improvement in all categories. They were even more impressed by the development of students’ “sentential responses.” “During the first weeks of the project, the children did not elaborate on their own limited sentences. However, the data clearly indicate an increase in the children’s inclination to expand and elaborate on their thoughts over the course of the project” (42). Our students noticed as well that the envelopes from their pen pals seemed to be less thick as the year went on. Initially, the children had sent many pictures with little accompanying text. Throughout the course of the year, however, we received fewer pictures and longer letters, demonstrating an increased vocabulary and greater facility in writing overall. Like the children in Ceprano and Garan’s study, our pen pals also displayed an increased willingness to initiate topics and a decreasing dependence upon pictures to convey meaning. Overall, the teacher-researchers involved in Ceprano and Garan’s pen pal project witnessed and documented development in the elementary school children’s writing that corresponds with our own anecdotal findings.
The college students we worked with also eventually began to see the importance of role modeling as part of the literacy acquisition process. As the semester began, we asked our students to follow formal letter format, including fully addressing the envelopes that they sent to their pen pals, even though they were to be delivered by hand and were covered with stickers instead of proper stamps. The students were reluctant at first, not seeing the value of making a seemingly informal exercise into a formal one. However, as the semester progressed, they began to see their pen pals using the same letter format. They also saw that their pen pals began using their letters as a vehicle for imagining themselves as college students and recognized immediately the importance of literacy in that process. Without the pen pal project, the elementary school students might not have become acquainted with college students and a college campus, even though it was only a short distance from their homes. Through discussion and written assignments, the SUNY students articulated their new understanding that, as writers, they had provided models for imitation and thereby a model for extended learning. Also, like the teacher-researchers in the Ceprano and Garan study, our students’ experience with these young writers dispelled many commonsense notions about how literate abilities are best taught and learned. They began to see the value of student-centered pedagogies (which involve the production of many flawed texts) over teacher-centered pedagogies (which result in the production of fewer but more mechanically correct texts). They began to see the role that reading experience plays in the acquisition of new genres for writing. They began to recognize that literacy is the process of working with words and social contexts rather than perfect reproduction of grammatical forms.

As mentioned earlier, the pen pal project provided students with both an opportunity to engage a live, interested audience and to ground the knowledge from the academic modules in lived experience. Perceived through this lens, the pen pal project and other writing assignments from Project Renaissance served the goals of WAC and, therefore, also served the goals of the university-wide writing requirement. As described by David Russell in *Writing in the Academic Disciplines*, these goals include treating “writing and its teaching as serious intellectual activities intimately related to disciplinary inquiry, activities that go beyond mere skill building or correction of surface features” (284). The truly interdisciplinary nature of the program afforded students the opportunity to transcend the “writing-intensive,” single course that the university also offers while still receiving writing-intensive credit for their work. Students studied and wrote about the National School Lunch Program (as part of the biology module), the demographics of school funding (as part of the sociology module), and educational philosophy (as part of the philosophy module). Their work as critical writers and researchers, their efforts at analyzing sociological, biological,
and philosophical matters, were given greater meaning for the students when related to the pen pal project, which provided the college students real reasons for analytic investigation and critical writing. One student, for example, applied the abstract concept of “functionalism” learned in the sociology module to what he had learned about his elementary school pen pals. He notes that “functionalism sees the limited positions of prestige as ever present in society so the . . . students should expect the same degree of stratification that their parents had to deal with. Chances for higher education and training are restricted by the limited income of their parents.” Here we can see a student-writer in the midst of acquiring the conventions of academic literacy, which he recognizes involves applying disciplinary concepts along with disciplinary terminology to a specific subject. The attempt is a bit awkward, as should be expected from a novice, but his effort at academic rhetorical sophistication is nonetheless obvious.

Another student, writing a paper for the biology module, discussed the guidelines for good nutrition as they are presented by the National School Lunch Program. She then uses this and the knowledge that she gained from the biology module about nutrition to gauge the nutrition of the school lunch that her pen pal receives. In her paper, titled “Troy School District: A Sociological Perspective,” written after a visit to the school, she notes that when her pen pal “picked up her lunch,” the SUNY student witnessed just how small the pizza was and how unhealthy the whole meal looked. She brought it back to the classroom where she was not the slightest bit interested in eating it. In fact, she was quite repulsed by the food, pulling it apart and playing with it rather than eating it. If she were either given a nutritious home packed lunch (like my mother used to do), or if she were to have a healthy meal at school, she would have been much happier to eat the food. Without even being aware, she would also be more apt to learn better and retain more, just from eating the right kinds of foods, which is a proven fact done in scientific studies.

This passage demonstrates much about the reciprocal learning process established among the academic and service learning components of Project Renaissance and the benefits for the college students as writers. First, it exemplifies the unevenness of literacy acquisition and intellectual development. This student’s analysis of the detrimental effect that this lunch could have on her pen pal’s ability to learn reflects her learning about nutrition from the biology module, demonstrating an emerging dialogue between academic learning and service learning, between abstract knowledge and experience. The “proven fact” line seems to be an attempt to provide academic support for anecdotal evidence,
revealing a developing sense of what constitutes an academic argument. Finally, this passage demonstrates the inherent difficulty of this student’s effort to move from the unexamined assumptions of liberal idealism (good moms pack good lunches) to a more complex understanding of social and biological issues (society has some responsibility to provide nutritious food at school). The resulting text is a mix of interpretative frameworks and discursive registers that demonstrates the extent to which the Project Renaissance program was pushing students out of their comfort zones as writers, intellectuals, and members of society. Their development as writers is uneven but, nonetheless, still evident in these texts and those written by other students in the program.

Thus, even with the motivation the pen pal project provided, this kind of learning was often difficult and uncomfortable for the college students. Like the students Herzberg describes in his early study “Community Service and Critical Teaching,” our students preferred to place a positive spin on the apparent inequities between their lives and those of their pen pals. Most students put a conservative spin on the situation, concluding, at first, that bad luck and the mistakes of the children’s parents had, unfortunately, landed them in a less than adequate school system and that it was up to the individual students to make changes in their own futures. In fact, the author of “Troy School District” goes on to say that despite the stark inequities between her home town and her pen pal’s, “just like any other child [sic], if they apply their time and skill correctly, these children will be able to excel in their academic studies. In turn, they can be allotted about the same advantages as middle and upper class students….” This comment was fairly typical in our students, who did not want to see poverty as a foregone conclusion in their pen pals’ lives. Some students asserted that the school “didn’t look so bad” and that they “didn’t see anything dangerous.”

When we assigned passages from Jonathan Kozol’s Amazing Grace, students responded that they hadn’t seen Kozol’s descriptions of poverty and inequity in this elementary school. They hadn’t seen any broken lights, falling ceiling tiles, temporary classrooms in the gym, or crumbling staircases upon their visit to the elementary school, and, thus, the students strongly asserted that this school was the same as any school in the suburbs. And, indeed, it was in many respects since the daily routines of learning were much the same here as in other elementary schools across the country. As a result, unlike many of the dramatically poor schools described by Kozol, poverty in this school was not so easy to see. What our students initially failed to notice was what was missing from the extant classrooms. For instance, no classrooms had computers; there were no extra boxes of tissues for runny noses, and there were few extra books or toys for the students to play with during free time. Our students couldn’t see whether or not there were extra stores of construction paper, glue, or scissors. As the year progressed, the academic modules helped the students see these
less-visible forms of poverty—inadequate lunches, underpaid teachers, high turnover rates for faculty and staff, low graduation rates from high school, and so on. However, early in the year, unaided by these academic frameworks for understanding nutrition, demography, and pedagogy, some students asserted a Franklinist reading of the situation, saying that “if the kids work hard, they can go as far as they want. It doesn’t matter what the school is like.” At the beginning of the year, the students had little choice but to perceive the differences between their own school experiences and opportunities and those of their pen pals through the hegemonic lens of commodity capitalism, dismissing out of hand any suggestion that they had received unfair social and economic advantages in relation to their pen pals. The experience of interacting with students very much unlike themselves was insufficient on its own to promote genuine learning among the college students.

The academic modules made it more difficult for students to maintain these initial perspectives. For instance, the author of “Troy School District” provides an alternative reading of her pen pal’s prospects for economic success by reading the situation through the concepts provided in the sociology module: “Through the perspective of Conflict Theory,” she asserts, “these children will have to fight and struggle twice as hard in order to stay on the same level as everyone else.” Although the students’ “reflexes” may have been toward throwing a positive spin on the situation, the academic material presented in the modules made it difficult for students to maintain that stance.

Throughout their experience, writing was the main vehicle for promoting reflection on and tying together the pen pal project and disciplinary components of Project Renaissance. Through writing and research assigned in the academic modules, students discovered that underfunded schools and disadvantaged children are not always betrayed by their appearance, but that inequity can be more subtle, emerging through major differences in pay scales among teachers in different school districts and teacher-student ratios. As a result of the school visits and the corresponding research and writing that they did, our students were able to achieve what Brown, Collins, and Duguid describe as “situated cognition,” which is a primary goal of a fully incorporated service learning program such as ours. Situated cognition allows students to ground theoretical and potentially acontextual knowledge in an actual context (25). By tackling a research writing activity (which normally would have resulted in a traditional research paper) within the lived context of the pen pal project, the research activity, itself, also became more “real.” In other words, had our students simply researched the school lunch program as part of the biology module, without the faces of small children (by now, their friends) associated with those lunches, the knowledge that poor nutrition undermines an individual’s ability to learn may not have made much of an impression on

48 Composition Studies
them. Rather, being able to understand that their little friends might or might not be getting the full daily requirements for good nutrition and to understand, further, that this has implications for learning and growing, gave the students fuel for writing invested and critical essays.

Situated cognition encouraged many students to question received knowledge rather than simply accept it as fact. One student, in an assignment for the sociology module on school demographics, questioned the significance of certain commonly cited test scores, arguing that a more important factor in determining the quality of a school is the student-teacher ratio. After doing some research using the U.S. Census Bureau database as part of her course work for the sociology module, this student reported that student-teacher ratios are lower where she went to school than where her pen pal goes to school and that those lower ratios allow “students to receive more attention from the teacher.” Another student, also utilizing some of what he learned in the sociology module, focused on differences in salaries and educational levels in his hometown as compared with that of his pen pal in order to understand the differences in opportunity he knew existed. He used newly acquired sociological language and concepts to comprehend the effects of the social structure and begin questioning the American myth of upward mobility; he writes:

On the macro level the poor have little reason for hope of leaving their class. . . . On the micro level there is great hope because individuals can work their way out of the inner cities and defy the odds. The macro level feelings are part of the very problem. In the poor neighborhoods it is expected that there is virtually no way out of the ghetto, and because of that lack of hope adolescents give up and turn their lives to crime and drugs.

The student supports his assertions about what happens at the macro level of society with demographics on the two communities at issue, noting that in his hometown “90% of the inhabitants are college graduates” and that the median income is $105,000. He argues that, therefore, it is “not coincidental that 95% of the students in my high school go on to higher learning.” This information is compared to his pen pal’s hometown, where the median income is $36,000 per year and where 48% of the work force is in what he calls “low level white collar jobs.” These residents, the student asserts, “have a low likelihood of forming large savings or social advancement . . . [which] makes college much less financially viable for the children” of this community. As with the other students, here we see a student who is working across multiple intellectual registers, bringing the academic to bear on developing an understanding of the experiential. He is developing facility with the conventions of academic discourse which include asserting conclusions (large-scale lack of opportunity
dampens individual’s sense of hope), providing support (statistics), and offering analysis (lack of opportunity is not “coincidental,” but systemic).

Ideally, we might have hoped that all of our students, through exposure to the principles of reciprocity and critical teaching, would develop what Herzberg calls a “social imagination” as these students appear to have done (“Community Service” 317). This social imagination enables students to see that their choices and actions have implications that ripple out from their individual lives, affecting the social, economic, and environmental worlds around them. Some students did indeed achieve parts of this. Many came to see their connectedness to larger contexts as inescapable and to understand that it plays a role in determining the opportunities an individual may be afforded. For some students, this social imagination included a new-found desire to imagine ways of transforming the world around them for the purpose of bringing about greater equity (Herzberg, “Community Service” 317).

While some students began to develop “social imaginations,” others achieved a greater understanding of the intricacies and conflicts of life, what Linda Flower calls “negotiated meaning.” Doing so is a complex activity, in which a learner fashions “a tentative and probably problematic negotiated response to the social and cognitive, historical and material conflicts within the human activity (and activity system) of community outreach” (182). To do so means that a participant and her instructors do not seek to resolve the problems inherent in the community as they see them, but rather to develop a critical consciousness of the contradictions between perception and lived reality. As preceptors charged with most of the responsibility for writing instruction and service learning on our team, this meant bringing significant attention to the nature of literacy in U.S. society, how it is acquired, interpreted, and used as a means of maintaining social inequities. Overall, our students learned that literacy is a multifaceted, dynamic social and intellectual ability. From readings, academic assignments, letter exchanges, and in-class discussions and writing workshops, they began to understand that literacy is more complicated than the formation of letters on a page. They gained an understanding of the difficulties of teaching literacy, especially in situations where privilege, resources, and role models are scarce. In their letters and academic essays, the college students demonstrated a greater appreciation of their own complicated positions both in the academy and in larger social contexts. They were also surprised by how much their pen pals knew about writing and how much they learned throughout the year. In reflective essays written at the end of the year, some students said that their own knowledge about writing had been enhanced and expanded by these experiences with children and their developing literacies. While as a group their intellectual development was uneven, all the students seem to have begun some of the difficult work of developing critical consciousness.
Our experience in Project Renaissance in some ways is not unusual. Many other programs and individual classes have successfully integrated writing-based service learning into their curricula, and there are certainly plenty of innovative programs for first-year students at colleges and universities around the country. However, we feel that the success of our project was partly due to the lengths that we went to in integrating academic content, service learning, and writing. Thomas Deans, in his schema for writing with the community, offers three questions which teachers may use to assess the overall effectiveness of their programs: “Have local and community members engaged in collaborative writing or research? Can students reflect critically on issues such as cultural difference? Has the local problem been effectively solved, addressed, or researched?” (17). We feel that our program made admirable efforts at addressing all three questions. While there is certainly no quick solution for the problems that we saw in the differences between the opportunities and educational benefits afforded the two groups of students, these inequities were approached and examined through collaborative writing and research in a way that enabled the SUNY students to reflect critically on the potential consequences of these differences. This integration of multiple academic subjects and disciplinary approaches, service learning, and an overall theme of literacy allowed our students to engage in a uniquely rewarding learning experience. The college students’ progress toward developing what we identified earlier as “social imaginations” and “negotiated meanings” as well as their efforts to acquire the conventions of academic discourse were apparent throughout the semester and are evident in their essays. Although these forms of development are intangible in some ways, in our opinion, they are the most lasting and socially transformative contributions of this integrated curriculum. Neither the college nor the elementary school students will be able to look at the other without seeing their connectedness. We feel that it is this recognition that each life is bound to each other life through a social and biological fabric that is most likely to bring about the lasting change that Deans describes.

Morristown, NJ
West Chester, PA

NOTES

1 SUNY Albany does not have a first-year composition program. Instead, students are required to take “writing-intensive” courses offered by different departments. The Project Renaissance program fulfilled this part of this requirement.

2 We found James Paul Gee’s distinction particularly useful here (and thank former Composition Studies editor Peter Vandenberg for drawing it to our attention). Gee defines acquisition as “a process of acquiring something subconsciously by
exposure to models” (539). Learning, in contrast, is defined by Gee as “a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching, though not necessarily from someone officially designated as a teacher” (539).

3 Students studied concepts such as the food chain, the laws of thermodynamics, and nutrition in the biology module. Papers and exams asked them to apply these concepts to problems related to world hunger.

4 Students learned demography as a field and studied influential social theories. Papers and exams asked them to apply these concepts to specific social situations, such as comparing the demographics of their hometowns with their pen pals’ hometown and drawing conclusions about the allocation of resources and privilege.

5 Students studied the philosophies of important figures such as Aristotle, Plato, Spinoza, Jesus, and Buddha, comparing their views on concepts such as “justice” and “freedom.” Exams and papers asked students to work through these concepts in careful steps, following various methods for argumentation, and to wrestle with the conflicts among different versions of the same concept.

WORKS CITED


Copyright of Composition Studies is the property of Composition Studies and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.