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MLA 2016 Roundtable Remarks for Session 253:
An Interactive Conversation about Service Learning in Literary Studies

“Tackling Children’s Literature and Childhood Literacy through Service Learning”

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After completing my Ph.D. in English, I accepted a position as Assistant Director for UCLA’s Center for Community Learning. As part of my work at UCLA, I teach at least one service learning course a year in public humanities. Most recently, I have been teaching a course on children’s literature and childhood literacy that is cross-listed in English and Civic Engagement. That class is the inspiration for my remarks today.

In some ways, children’s literature still holds a relatively tenuous position in literary studies. It is not generally part of the core curriculum for an English major, but I find that literature for young readers is an area of high interest to undergraduate students—both those majoring in English and those studying other fields. Children’s literature is also an ideal area for exploring connections between literature and public life through service learning.

As part of my course, undergraduates tutor children from diverse socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds at K-12 schools and educational nonprofits. Many of the children we work with are English Language Learners and they are often the first in their families to attend US schools. My undergraduates tutor primarily in reading and writing—but also other subjects—for approximately 3 hours per week for a minimum total of 20 hours during the ten-week quarter. I teach my course with a community-engaged approach in part because I really believe that one of the best ways to learn about how children’s literature works is by reading it with its intended audience. But I also want my students to see how the ability to read and write empowers individuals and communities—and I want them to understand the diverse social and cultural factors that can make it more challenging for some kids to learn to love reading.

By collaborating with local schools and nonprofits, my students help community leaders address gaps in the education system and build a college-going culture. At the same time, the experience of reading with real live children gives undergraduates a richer understanding of how publishing and reading practices evolve over time. That is, service learning not only teaches students about reading in the present but also gives them a richer understanding of literary history. Reading out loud with others reminds us that our experience is not universal. Reading is historically and cultural situated. Nothing drives this home more quickly for millennial students than when they tell a child how much they loved Harry Potter while growing up—only to be told Harry Potter is no longer cool or, worse, that Harry Potter is for old people.

Here is a quick overview of some of the topics that regularly come up during discussions in my class and some of the assignments I’ve used to help students connect their service learning experience with traditional forms of literary analysis:

- We examine how fairy tales have evolved and how stock characters like princesses and monsters and their plots continue to impact how young readers (and oh-so-many modern
Disney fans) develop ideas about gender and embodiment.

- We study how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century booksellers used toys and play to market books to young readers and then debate the extent to which such strategies are alive and well in publishing to this day. Thankfully, my students can still visualize the children's book section of a bookstore or library when I ask them to describe and analyze such spaces, with their bright colors and interactive games. But we also discuss how ebooks, apps, and other forms of digital media are changing how children learn to read—and I encourage my students to talk with our community partners and with the children they meet about how and what kids are reading today. Participating in service learning adds dimension to our conversations about learning to read in the digital age because my students can see first-hand how the uneven distribution of technology impacts the ways that lower-income students and families encounter texts. But observing is just the start. Service learning is about figuring out what we can do together with our communities to combat inequity and build capacity for social change. This is why my students are on the ground, working right alongside teachers and other community leaders.

- I have also developed assignments that ask college students to respond directly to current events related to challenges in literacy education and publishing. For instance, we work to draft K-12 curriculum responding to Common Core and to current events like the recent #weneeedgebooks campaign. Students might do this work quickly in class—working in teams to come up with an outline for teaching a book on the banned and challenged book list—or they might choose to tackle current events in greater depth in a paper or final project. Whether the assignment is small or large, students marshal evidence from their service learning experience to think creatively about the complex challenges of teaching and publishing literature in the 21st century.

I think one of the biggest challenges of service learning pedagogy—but also one of the biggest rewards—is that service learning challenges instructors to develop new types of assignments that can assess how students synthesize what they learn on and off campus. Traditional close-reading papers often are not enough on their own; nor is it sufficient to just splice in a few reflective journals and call it a day. Service learning is at its best, I think, when at least some of the work students submit for a grade is not only inspired by their collaborations with community partners but integral to the partnership. When service learning scholars talk about reciprocity and mutual benefit, I think this is what we ought to mean—not just that everyone benefits in their own way, but that we all benefit, together, from working on a shared project.

I still struggle to achieve this goal of mutual benefit with my graded assignments—and UCLA’s 10-week quarter is a big part of the challenge—but I keep getting closer each year. All of my children’s literature students complete a research project at the end of the term that blends evidence from their service learning experience with scholarly sources to make an argument about the public relevance of literature for young readers. Some students draft their own children’s books with case statements providing rationale for the design choices they have made. Others draft curriculum for a specific population of students, while others draft library catalogues for a particular community. Students who are not comfortable with these more creative projects can choose to write a more traditional research paper on issues related to the course (but most choose one of the creative options). I encourage students to share these projects with their partners and many do so, leaving behind well-researched book lists and other useful materials. The rush of the ten-week quarter can make sharing difficult to coordinate and I do not currently require it for this class—but I keep working on these logistics and I
do what I can to encourage students to continue working with their organizations after my course is over. Each year, at least a few apply for internships or scholarships to continue their work.

This issue of sustainability is another big challenge we need to tackle as we work to implement community-engaged learning. Partnerships generally provide greater benefit to communities when they are lasting. It is not helpful to organizations to train students who only stay for a day or two—but even a ten-week quarter is not long enough to make a real dent in literacy challenges in Los Angeles (or in the social justice issue of your choice). Through my work with the Center for Community Learning, I am able to introduce my community partners to other faculty, whose students can pick up where mine leave off—and your campuses may be able to help you invest in long-term partnerships as well. But we will need to think outside the box of a single quarter or semester if we want community-engaged pedagogy to contribute to meaningful and lasting social change.

Service learning and other forms of public humanities pedagogy excite me because they offer such unique opportunities for putting humanities inquiry into practice. With community partners as co-educators and true collaborators, we can challenge ourselves and our students to be part of a vibrant present and future of humanities practice, one that really starts to make good on the public mission of higher education. I am thrilled to see MLA making space for engaged pedagogy at this year’s conference and look forward to talking with all of you about strategies for developing courses that are mutually beneficial for both campus and community stakeholders.

NOTES

1 More information about the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts can be found at the program website: http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/. More information about #weneeddiversebooks can be found at the campaign website: http://weneeddiversebooks.org/.

2 The ethos of mutual benefit is at the core of service learning and other forms of community-engaged pedagogy, and has been discussed at length by a wide range of scholars. Tania Mitchell provides a useful overview of this scholarship in “Traditional vs. Critical Service Learning” in The Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning (Spring 2008): 50-65. For an overview focused more squarely on approaches to community-engaged pedagogy in humanities disciplines, see Teresa Mangum’s article “Going Public: From the Perspective of the Classroom” in Pedagogy 12.1 (2012): 5-18. The organizers for MLA 2016 Session 253 also recently edited a collection of essays titled Service Learning and Literary Studies in English (MLA 2015), and panelists for Session 253—including myself—contributed chapters to this volume.