

The Spirit of Voluntarism in English Composition

“Teacher, you changed my life.” These may be the sweetest words an educator will ever hear. Most teachers do not hear them often, but then few classes make changing lives a goal in the way that Jim Wilcox’s class does. When Wilcox nudges students into community voluntarism and then asks them to write in multiple genres about every aspect of the experience, he can be certain that the student who leaves his classroom at the semester’s end will be quite different from the student who entered at the beginning.

JIM WILCOX

Prof, I just wanted to tell you that I’ve changed my major, due mostly to that research project we did. I want to give the rest of my life to doing what I can for other people,” Mike told me on the last day of class, one semester long ago.

At that moment, I realized I had stumbled onto something that transcended a course in college composition. Writing, when done from the heart, can change lives.

Whether it is the tragedies of September 11, 2001, and the Oklahoma City Bombing, or a sense of despair associated with the public school shootings over the past few years, or the current recession, or any number of other things, youth today seem to be looking for purpose. And, as the generation before them, they’re looking outside themselves for that purpose.

With that in mind, I give the students in my freshman level Composition II course a list of local facilities that serve the community. The list, which is often simply a copy of the appropriate pages from the telephone book, includes places such as



Planned Parenthood, Right Choice, YWCA/YMCA, Special Olympics, Child Advocacy Center, Jim Thorpe Rehabilitation Center, food pantries, counseling centers, burn units, and AIDS hospices. My students’ job is to select a facility that for one reason or another hits them in the heart. They often base their choices on personal experiences, but a few students select a facility that they have read about in newspapers, magazines, or books. I think it is important for the students to choose the focus for this assignment because where the heart leads, the head

(and whatever other body parts are needed for writing) will follow.

Once they have called and made arrangements, students are required to visit the institutions and gather as much information as they can by taking tours, visiting with patients or victims, interviewing workers and volunteers, picking up as much printed material as they find available, etc. When they return to class with all the necessary hard data, they are given a series of assignments that include:

- an **objective report** that *shows* what the facility looks and acts like
- a **personal interview/profile** to give a face and a name to the social issue
- an **evaluation essay** that requires them to set up valid criteria by which to make forthright assessments
- an **investigative report** that includes information from a secondary source, such as a related newspaper or magazine article
- a **letter to the editor** of a campus newspaper or other publication in

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which the student writer responds to what he or she has discovered.

I offer as much instruction as I can with guidelines and sample materials from students who have previously completed the course. These come from a file I have created by duplicating assignments as they are submitted. My students find these materials especially useful.

The Objective Report

In her objective report on the facility, one student, Blessin, wrote:

Compassionate Hands acts as a clearinghouse, service and referral agency for the people of Yukon. It was founded in 1993 by the Yukon Ministerial Alliance to help people with various problems or needs. The community service agencies, along with business leaders and caring citizens, help the organization in its efforts to care for the less fortunate. A volunteer sits in the front room to greet those who enter and leads them to the specific area of help they need. The rooms have beds, chairs, and other basics, and to help the disabled and elderly, there is a ramp leading to the front door from the parking lot. For the children who come, there are toys to help them feel more comfortable and cared for.

The goal of Compassionate Hands is to offer assistance as well as foster hope, lend emotional support and ultimately help clients to become self-sufficient.'

Lana visited the local Ronald McDonald House and reported that "outside the house are decorations of many hearts. From the metal hearts on the front gate to the heart-shaped bricks and stepping

stones to the windows in the shape of hearts, the house displays its welcoming love for those in need."

Lana then "zoomed her camera" in on a specific moment that snagged her attention. "The record for the smallest baby to survive is a little girl born at fifteen ounces. The parents stayed connected and bonded to the infant by voice, continuing to talk to their baby everyday until they could hold her." Then she added, "The periods of time that families stay at the house average from one night up to six months; unfortunately, because there is a limited amount of space in the house, families are sometimes turned away."

Ryan, who also went to the Ronald McDonald House, reported that it "is open to all families who have a child under the age of twenty-one who is in need of medical treatment but lives outside Oklahoma County, regardless of their economic status. The families are asked to make a \$15 donation per night if at all possible even though the actual cost for a family to stay at the house is around \$65 per night."

Kelly wrote about a downtown church that reaches out to its community in novel ways. She wrote:

Penn Avenue Church of the Nazarene opened its doors in 1922. The building is fairly small, but it is well equipped to serve the people of the community. There is a large kitchen with an abundance of food, a small clothing store, a nice-sized sanctuary with a baptistery, balcony and several classrooms. The clothing store is set up beside the kitchen and everything is organized like a Goodwill store. The items are

separated by size and style and the people are given whatever they need. Every Saturday morning volunteers come and prepare breakfast for around 200 homeless people. While giving the people food, they are also giving them warmth and fellowship. As the homeless people leave, they are given sack lunches.

Part of the requirement for this initial report is to find out some of the facility's future goals. Not all findings are positive. Shannon found that the plans for expanding the organization known as Reaching Our City (The ROC) were a little behind schedule. "The dental clinic and daycare were supposed to be started in January of this year," she wrote, "but some of the plans fell through. If everything else goes as expected, these two programs should be started by the end of March."

General guidelines for the objective report might include writing a paragraph that describes the facility, a paragraph that details the facility's history, a paragraph or two that explains what is done there, and a couple of paragraphs that describe a particular person, activity, or treatment the student witnesses. I stress repeatedly that this report is *not* about their personal visits or tours of the buildings and that they are to remain in the formal third-person point of view.

It is not uncommon for the student-writers to get emotionally involved with the activities of the facilities they visit, so the teacher needs to reiterate frequently the need to remain objective in this style of writing. A few students invariably get so excited about what's going on there that they eventually get involved with the facility as volunteers. One student became a Big Brother; another spent every Thursday evening with an AIDS patient;

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another regularly visited an elderly patient at the Jim Thorpe Center; still another volunteered at Special Olympics. The examples of this are numerous, and each is gratifying to me. This has become a course that makes a difference.

The Personal Profile

The personal profile is less prescriptive than the facility report, but the students are absolutely required to make an appointment with their chosen individual (rather than just “popping in”), take a prepared set of questions (we model this with in-class interviews with each other), use both direct and indirect quotations, and stay away from strict “question/answer” presentations. I often suggest students look at the book *On the Road* by Charles Kuralt for some wonderful examples of profiles.

Obviously, much of the class time during this unit is spent discussing problems and gaps. Most students return to the facilities for this follow-up interview, while others rely on the convenience of the phone to conduct them. As long as the student met his or her subject during the initial visit so that a physical description of the person can be included in the profile, I see no problem with using the phone.

“Amy’s degree in theology and neighborhood outreach helps her care for the less fortunate,” Blessin wrote in her profile of Compassionate Hands employee Amy Hoening. “She spends about thirty-five hours a week at Compassionate Hands and receives about \$20,000 annually for her work. She loves to come to work, though, because every day is completely different from the last; there is no *typical* day at Compassionate Hands.”

Blessin went on, noting that a few years earlier:

... a woman arrived at the doorstep of Compassionate Hands with barely any earthly possessions. Amy and the volunteers gave the woman the maximum amount of help they were able to give. Last year, this same woman donated to the organization the largest amount given by any

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donor. Amy, with the assistance of the volunteers, successfully helped the woman to achieve self-sufficiency.

Another student began her personal profile of Sara, a twenty-three-year-old graduate of Oklahoma City Community College with a degree in physical therapy, with a definition:

A team consists of an organized group of people who work together and strive for a common cause. A variety of teams exist—from the football field to the basketball court, from the corporate office to the small business. Some of the most prestigious teams are found in hospitals everywhere. At the Integrated Specialty Hospital, Sara finds herself part of a team whose common goal is to care for and assist people who are going through rehabilitation therapy.

Sara has learned some essential life lessons. She has worked with victims of drunk-driving accidents, physical

abuse and drug abuse. She has occasionally worked in the prisoners’ unit. Here she has performed therapy on murderers, robbers, rapists, and all kinds of criminals.

“At first it was hard, but I had to treat the patients in the prisoners’ unit exactly the same as any other patient” Sara stated.

Then the student-writer told one of Sara’s stories in order to show a side of Sara that seemed important.

One day, a sixty-seven-year-old woman who suffered from congestive heart failure came into the hospital. She had had a massive heart attack, and her heart stopped beating for thirty minutes at one point. She stayed at the hospital for four months, when, with the help of the team, she learned many of life’s normal activities all over again. Sara, along with the other occupational therapists, taught her how to sit up, walk short distances, eat, and other daily activities. She learned how to talk with the assistance of the speech therapist, and she also received medical treatment from all the nurses and doctors.

“I have been blessed to have a job doing what I truly enjoy doing, and the best part of it all is when I see the patients successfully leaving the hospital with their families after being treated and helped,” Sara said.

Kelly wrote about a counselor who graduated from our school several years ago.

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A typical day for Sharon Pound starts around 9:00 A.M. She prepares the things she will need for the day and organizes her thoughts. Starting around 10:00, she begins to see patients, the appointments normally lasting one hour. She sees patients from 10:00 until 6:00 in the evening.

“Not taking the job home is the hardest part of the job,” Pound explains. “After listening to all of the trials and suffering my patients are faced with, it is extremely difficult not to bring it home and let it consume me. It is wonderful, however, when a patient begins to improve. I know that I am not directly the cause of the improvement, but it gives me great joy to realize that I am God’s tool that has helped a person overcome his problems.”

The Evaluation Essay

When it came time for the evaluation essay, one student chose to assess the campus library, based on three criteria: personnel, physical plant, and materials. She wrote:

The most important aspect of any library is its staff. People such as Professor Joshua Achipa help countless students with research that ranges from a small journal article to references needed for a paper. He always sits at his desk on the main floor, looking for people that may need his assistance. If a student asks for help, he first directs them to the right area and then goes back to the desk to search on his computer for items that would help the student. If the student is confused and has no idea what to do next, Professor Achipa is there to suggest and guide.

He is well-versed about the journals and the computer search engines located on the first floor, and if there is any material not available at this library, he will lead students to another library that can better help them.

The Investigative Report

Once this first series of assignments is completed, the introduction of secondary research takes place as students are sent to the Internet and various libraries to find one article (just one at first, then more subsequently) that deals with the social issue they have been experiencing firsthand. With a set of criteria that I supply, students evaluate the article, pointing out its merits and its weaknesses. Samples are important at this juncture, as some students find connecting a printed article about a social issue to a real, live social facility fairly difficult, yet this is an imperative step toward complete and accurate research.

Remember Lana and the Ronald McDonald House? She found a website for a charity that “provides specialized medical helicopters and aircrew, along with in-flight intensive care for sick and injured children throughout the United Kingdom,” called Teddy Bear Air Care. “Every day,” Lana reported, “thousands of critically ill children are transported between hospitals to receive life-saving treatment at specialist units. The Teddy Bear Air Care helicopter-ambulance service reduces transportation time, thus raising the patient’s probability of successful treatment.”

Shannon, who wrote about an inner-city help facility, stated:

At Reaching Our City (ROC) in Oklahoma City, there are many

programs that reach out to urban families. From a medical clinic to an after-school program, the ROC provides for low-income families. The after-school program is one of the largest areas of outreach. It is split into three groups: learning centers, computer centers and recreation/art centers. As suggested in an article, “Urban After-School Programs: Evaluations and Recommendations,” published by the Clearinghouse on Urban Education Digest, there are five general categories to enlist: language arts, study skills, academic subjects, tutoring and community-based. The ROC incorporates all five of these categories into their three programs.

A Letter to the Editor

At this point in the process, I let the students have a little “fun,” writing a letter to the editor that affords them the opportunity to spout off, whether to the student body in the school newspaper or to a broader audience in a publication of their choice. Now they have a forum to vent their frustrations and offer their suggestions. And though I often disagree with my students’ opinions, I see the importance of relieving them of emotional baggage and feelings of powerlessness before they begin the arduous task of formal and rational persuasion.

In her letter to the editor, Blessin wrote that “many of the role models today are athletes, actors, and musicians who appear to be making a lot of money and are, thus, happy. The media exemplify their lifestyle to the level that consumers are willing to go to any extent to reach that rank. If the media spent more time focusing on people who help those in need or people who do their jobs faith-

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fully and still live successfully, the youth of today might have a different picture of who they choose as their role models.”

Some students are not so selfless. One student wrote, “As a sales representative at a cell phone kiosk in a mall, I have had the opportunity to come into contact with a number of different types of people. I run into problems or conflicts not with the rude or upset customers, yelling angrily in my face; no, it is when a man or woman who cannot speak English approaches the kiosk that a real problem arises.”

“Everyone who comes to America,” she concludes, “should have to pass a written English test, proving the ability to communicate in social settings. If they cannot earn the minimal score on the proficiency test, then they should be denied a green card and a job.”

Kelly focused her letter on some of the people being helped at the church she visited.

Each day in the United States, more than three children die as a result of abuse in the home. Approximately three million child abuse cases are reported each year: about one report every ten seconds, and the estimated number of cases is three times that. Numerous organizations are available for abuse reports and help. One way to stop abuse [is] to help the person who is having difficulty with a child get involved with a preventative program, or one could help develop parenting resources at a local library.

Now the student is ready to write a research paper that has both head and heart in the driver’s seat. She has studied an issue and the problems involved, and

she has started to form a list of solutions. For example, through her visit to Compassionate Hands of Yukon and seeing the poor and sick of the local community, Blessin, a pre-med major, began to look into the growing ineffectiveness of widely prescribed antibiotics in fighting off certain illnesses and diseases. With the depth and breadth of her background study and research in the writing assignments she has done, she now has the context by which to discuss the problem both acutely and astutely.

The student who wrote of her frustration with bilingualism at the mall’s kiosk is now ready to fashion a highly informative argument that proposes mastery of two languages (one’s native language as well as one foreign language) during the public school education process. She might also propose her other idea of forcing all immigrants to master English before being given a green card or a job. Which ever way she goes and whatever solutions she proposes, she certainly has first-hand knowledge of the frustrations involved in such a situation and at least the beginning of a viable solution.

Besides improving their researching and writing skills, students learn that their

community is, indeed, full of problems and frustrations, but they also become aware that people in the community are dedicating their lives to facing and healing these problems and frustrations. And they learn that their own talents and time are valuable assets in solving some of the world’s problems—one life and one face at a time.

My classes continue to fill up with students every semester, so apparently this strategy is filling a need. Students and advisors recognize that it provides a bridge to the sociology, theology, and philosophy courses students will pursue in future semesters. And for two or three or four students every semester, this course offers an opportunity to climb outside themselves and become an integral and vital part of the community. The truth is, I don’t know why or how I ever taught any other way.

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Propose a Session for the 2003 NWP Annual Meeting

Information about proposing a session for the 2003 National Writing Project Annual Meeting—

to be held November 20-22 in San Francisco—is available on the NWP website at www.writingproject.org/Calendar/AM/2003/. The deadline for proposals is May 12, 2003.

