

## **Challenging Assessment Practices, and the Need for Multimodal Applications to Service Learning in First-Year Composition**

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Much has been discussed regarding the benefits of service learning in first-year composition (FYC). Kankiewicz (2005), for example, stated that service learning “enhances critical thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis by involving students in identifying and framing problems in settings that transcend disciplinary boundaries” (Pedagogical Implications section). And Kraemer (1991) pointed out that “basic writing teachers who find service learning appealing are often committed to basic writing as part of a rhetorical education, preparing students for leadership roles in workplace and civic deliberations—preparing them, then, to imagine their reading and writing as public acts” (p. 93). Service learning provides students with opportunities for developing their composition skills with purpose as they engage with a community and consider how to articulate that experience to an academic audience.

However, this ideal is not often the reality of service learning in FYC. Students may be fully engaged in their experience but not as fine-tuned in their writing to successfully articulate their work in the reflection portion of an assignment. Beaman and Jackson (2019) argued that “if composition teachers do not spend time thinking about [for example] the definition of citizenship [involved in service learning], then overlooking the reality that not everyone has an equal opportunity for full participation in it can become problematic” (p. 75). It is unfair to prompt students to spend time organizing and participating in a service-learning experience—which may be more than half of the assigned workload—only to be graded extensively on a written component that exists outside of that experience. In considering the ways that service-learning is contextualized as part of the practices of composition, Pine (2008) argued the following:

Should instructors make such academicizing of students’ [service learning] experience a mandatory part of an academic essay? . . . They do not have the opportunity to achieve critical distance and contextualize their service work among other sources/scholars as evidence for an academic argument. Furthermore, they do not have to engage in the social issues surrounding their specific service experience in writing an academic essay (p. 50).

The idea that students can participate in service-learning but be assessed only on a written reflection of that experience can be frustrating to both instructors and students and make one question the value of such projects that seem misaligned with course objectives of FYC.

Assessment has been a challenge in my own experience as an instructor implementing experiential learning in FYC. It can be clear to me that a student has had a complete interactive experience where learning was involved; however, that learning isn’t

deemed tangible until the student has successfully articulated their experience in writing. To address this challenge, I support the use of multimodal discourses that students are already practicing in their daily lives to connect and resonate their experiences. As students communicate through social media or group chats, the choices they make among these contrasting modes highlight the particular emotional connection they have with each experience. Madianou and Miller (2012, as quoted in Williams, 2017) argued that “polymedia is not a range of technical potentials, it is a series of cultural genres or emotional registers that make these contrasts into significant differences in communication by exploiting them for various tasks within relationships” (p. 133). Moreover, Kankiewicz (2005) reasoned that service-learning pedagogy “involves students in assessing outcomes in a way that reveals the practical implications of chosen theories, research tools, analysis techniques, and presentation modes” (Pedagogical Implications section). Including modes of presentation with which students are already familiar and can more accurately reflect their experience beyond text-based presentation alone can provide equitable context for assessment of service learning assignments.

In my FYC course, students develop a multimodal brochure (see Figure 1) that takes an argumentative stance on an issue related to their service learning.<sup>1</sup> This stance helps students center and contextualize their experience. Sura (2015) argued that “to teach rhetoric is, for many rhetoricians, to teach civic engagement. Yet, any foray into service-

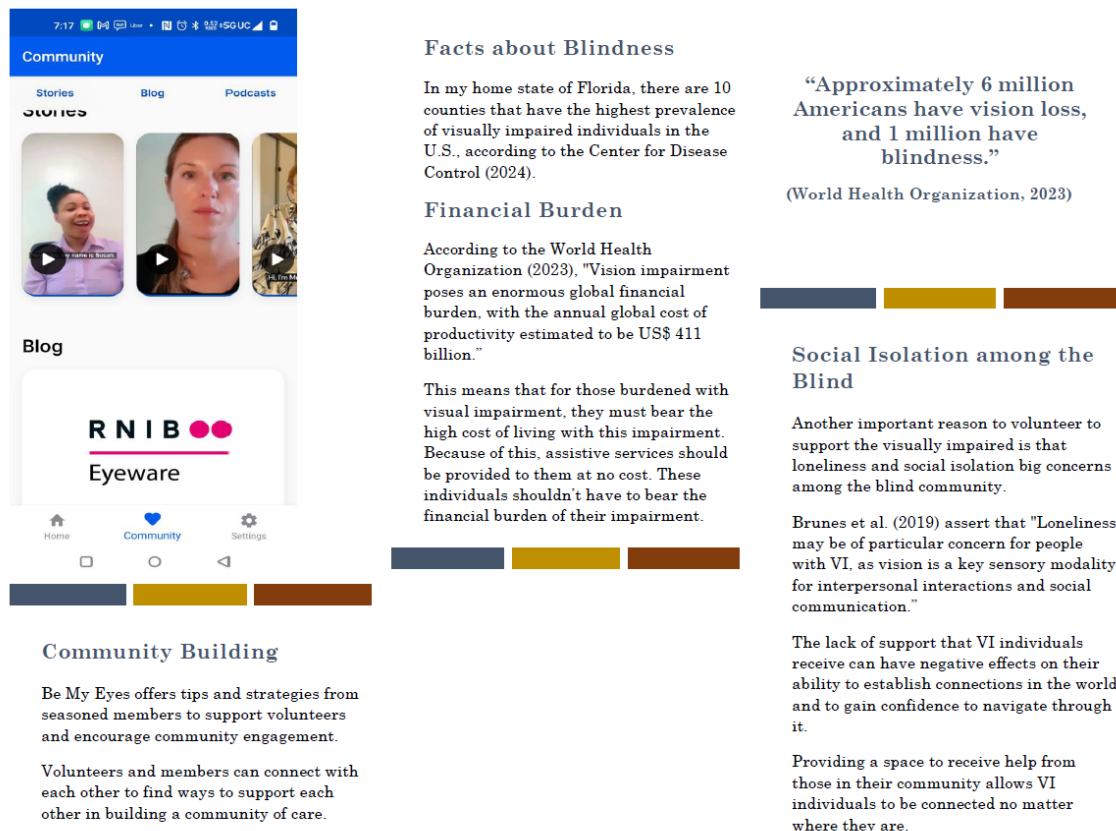


Figure 1. Sample student brochure.

learning research in first-year writing courses will reveal both excitement and ambivalence” (p. 114). The excitement of these experiences is the hope that they will constitute tangible learning opportunities; the ambivalence is that they may be limited in facilitating rhetorical practices of composition. The multimodal brochure aims to capture this excitement as a tangible reflection of students’ service-learning as it resolves the ambivalence by including audio and visual artifacts of their experience. These artifacts must be primary sources that the students themselves collect from their learning experience, such as audio interviews with community partners, and videos and images that not only resonate the emotional connection they have had with the experience but also provide an opportunity for the audience to connect with this experience beyond words.

Creating a real-world brochure enables students to avoid the detrimental abstractions of service-learning that fail to take their experience beyond the FYC classroom. In those cases, students complete the experience, write a reflection, and forget both the assignment and the experience shortly thereafter. As Eby (1998) argued,

Frequently practitioners of service-learning are long on motivation and good will but short on expertise that relates to social and community change. There is a particular challenge to design programs which can use short term service-learning students in ways which fit into long term community programs or to find ways for students to spend longer periods of time in agencies. *The learning agenda must include social structural issues.* Learning in service-learning is both intentional and serendipitous. It is important to thoughtfully manage both areas. Curricular content should help students to develop what is often called a “sociological imagination,” that is the ability to see patterns, structures and social context. (p. 7)

The brochure prompts students “to think about polymedia literacy practices within the context of sociality [and] to consider how the medium and mode, as well as the message, will be read within the context of the particular relationship” (Williams, 2017, p. 133). The critical thinking skills of analysis and synthesis are thereby united with an argumentative stance that comes alive as students engage their audience with a shared experience of connecting with a community through multimodality.

Applying multimodal concepts in FYC allows students to articulate their experiences in ways that provide for a clear and structured composition. First-year composition can often feel to students abstract and without purpose. Simply responding to and reflecting on experiences through heavy, text-based discourse can leave out vital points of connection between students and their service learning. Through multimodality, the brochure enacts the contact zone described by Pratt (1991): “The idea of a contact zone is intended in part to contrast with ideas of community that underlie much of the thinking about language, communication, and culture that gets done in the academy” (p. 37). Assessing service-learning assignments on the basis of their multimodality involves recognizing and valuing the diversity of student experience and thereby reshaping the academy’s ideas about community.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>This assignment partially fulfills students' service-learning requirement at Palm Beach Atlantic University. As Underwood et al. (2000) pointed out, "to integrate service-learning efforts within an institutional mainstream, they must be established and perceived as central to the University's mission" (p. 21). Because students must already undertake service learning each semester, this institutional requirement eliminates logistical challenges of time and enforcement that might otherwise be encountered in FYC.

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