

Challenges of Identity and Responsibility in Connecting the Classroom to the World

John O'Connor, New Century College, George Mason University

“Connecting the Classroom to the World” is the motto of George Mason University’s seven-year old interdisciplinary college, New Century College (NCC). The “connecting” can happen in many ways—community-based courses, internships, study abroad, extra-curricular projects, service-learning, and joint programs with the local Learning in Retirement Institute are some examples. The connections provide a practical dimension to what is learned in the classroom, but more important, represent experiential forms of learning and ways of knowing. The connections have both personal and institutional implications as they encourage a more socially responsive and personally reflective community within New Century College’s curricular structure, which is predominately organized around learning communities.

With the guidance of the Center for Service and Leadership, NCC faculty, staff, and students participate in multiple forms and levels of community-based learning. In particular, service-learning at NCC fits well into the learning communities because of the shared focus on interdisciplinary understanding, the value placed on community-building, and the emphasis on reflective practice. Service-learning occurs in both stand-alone courses (e.g., “Alternative Spring Break”) and in upper-level learning communities. Our strongest learning communities are built around complex, unstructured, real problems rather than rote knowledge or fictional case studies. Students address these problems through various service-learning experiences.

At its best, service-learning at NCC fosters stronger learning communities and a more complex sense of identity for students when the service experiences raise issues of authority, leadership, and democratic practice. Ideally, the community work is built on a partnership, with all parties identifying and developing the issues to be addressed in the classroom and the community. Students collaborate with faculty members and community agencies to create learning objectives and experiences related to course goals. This reciprocal process is consistently recognized as fundamental to successful service-learning in the various lists of good practice (Mintz and Hesser 1996, 28-44). In addition, the academic study is interdisciplinary, recognizing the complexity of contemporary issues and the focused perspective of traditional disciplinary expertise. Together, students, faculty members, and community partners ideally confront questions of what is expertise and who is an expert, what makes a right answer or action, and why multiple perspectives are not only possible but preferred. Such questions are fundamental to citizenship in a diverse democracy.

Because of the emphasis on reciprocal partnerships in service-learning, students have substantially more freedom, responsibility, and accountability in these programs than in most learning activities and volunteer opportunities. Academic study and community work are dynamically related as two ways of learning—a view of service-learning different from one that has study/theory applied to work/practice (Oates and Gaither 2001, 14-42). When the academic expectations are clear going into the course or activity and revisited through

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New Century College (NCC) at George Mason University is a degree-granting academic unit in its seventh year of operation. Its mission is to offer degree programs that integrate interdisciplinary knowledge with workplace and lifelong learning skills. Students engage in active learning, conduct independent inquiry and research, and prepare to be active citizens in a multicultural world. The Integrative Studies B.A. and B.S. Degree Programs are composed of four elements: a first year of common, interdisciplinary learning community courses and integrated learning; upper-level, inquiry-based learning communities; an interdisciplinary concentration or major; and a graduation portfolio based on nine liberal arts competencies. Students in the Integrative Studies Program are also required to participate in twelve credits of experiential learning, which can be service-learning, co-ops, internships, or study abroad. (www.ncc.gmu.edu)

Two centers in the college support parts of our experiential learning program. While serving the whole university, they are administratively in New Century College because of the close connection between the goals and missions of the centers and the college. NCC provides the critical mass of students to make the centers viable, and the college faculty and center staff work closely to create a continual, extended learning community.

The Center for Service and Leadership promotes civic responsibility by combining academic study, leadership development, and direct community service. The center offers credit and non-credit leadership development and service-learning courses, workshops, seminars, and conferences; support for faculty integrating service-learning into their courses; and sponsorship of campus-wide service and leadership programs. The center's website address is www.gmu.edu/student/csl.

The Center for Field Studies provides a broad range of field-based experiential learning opportunities within a strong, academic framework. The Center includes the Bahamas Environmental Research Center (BERC) located in the settlement of Staniard Creek, Andros Island, The Bahamas. The center's website address is: www.hcc.gmu.edu/cfs, click on Bahamas Environmental Research Center and then click on Field Study at the bottom of the page.

John O'Connor is a faculty member in New Century College and a visiting scholar at American Association for Higher Education.

reflection, most students flourish under this challenge. In the most challenging—and generally most rewarding—learning communities, students confront unstructured problems critically and imaginatively, and they become aware of the intersection of knowledge, skill, and attitudes in public problem-solving. Recent New Century College programs include “Progress in America,” “Medicine, Justice, and Public Policy,” and “Interpersonal Communication and Conflict Transformation.” Through group and community activities, students “practice” commitments to democratic principles of diversity, social justice, equality, and access. They develop a greater sense of personal efficacy while recognizing the social context of their participation, both in the classroom and in the communities. Partly because of these experiences, NCC students have also been elected to or selected for many of the student leadership positions on campus.

Success is also dependent upon teachers who understand their role is different from one in the traditional hierarchal, individualistic, and passive classroom, and upon staff who are comfortable with democratic partnerships with community members, faculty, and students. In opening up the decision-making process in the learning community, faculty members demonstrate a more democratic leadership. Faculty and staff participation in NCC service-based learning communities mirror and model what we expect of our students. Discovery and understanding are collaborative, inquiry-based, and continual. Learning communities become “communities of practice” (Wenger 1999), building upon the collective insight and skill of the group to create new knowledge. One result is that faculty teaching and scholarship become more integrated as well as more public.

The following examples from New Century College learning communities, programs, and activities provide more detail regarding ways these issues and questions are addressed. They deliberately range across space, from an undeveloped island in the Bahamas, to the campus and local community, to cyberspace. Each case explores complex issues of power and authority and suggests implications for community-based work and students' multiple roles.

Sustaining Community Partnerships on Andros Island

Andros Island is the largest of the Bahamian islands, located less than 100 miles southeast of Miami, Florida, and 35 miles west of Nassau, Bahamas. It is bounded to the east by the third largest barrier reef in the world; the west coast of the island gradually fades into the sea as the Great Bahamas Bank. Marine environments range from open water through the pristine barrier reef and numerous patch reefs, intertidal areas, seagrass beds, mangroves, mudflats, tidal creeks, and rocky, silty and sandy coastlines. There are very few human inhabitants on Andros, and virtually everyone lives in small settlements along the east coast.

The Bahamas Environmental Research Center (BERC) is a NCC partnership with the College of the Bahamas and the community of Staniard Creek on Andros Island. We take students to the island community and with community members develop public work projects. These have included building a library, creating public art, and researching the island's environment. BERC provides

laboratory and classroom space for innovative academic and interpretive programs. Community meetings are also held at BERC, and the community uses the kitchen on a regular basis. We work within the community, and with the government, to provide information and advice on environmental issues. By design, BERC is an “academic community” in which the traditional borders between student, teacher, and local resident, as well as those between the academic disciplines are deliberately indistinct (www.ncc.gmu.edu/cfs, click on Bahamas Environmental Research Center and then click on Field Study at the bottom of the page). New faculty and staff participate each year, with a core of old hands who have been teaching and researching on the island for many years. Learning communities and other classes visit Andros Island between semesters, during spring break, and during the summer. Some of the courses are for one to three credits and are held for an intensive one- to two-week period on the island. For some of the four- to eight-credit learning communities, Andros field study is built in as the service-learning component to be completed during spring or semester breaks. The number of classes visiting the island varies, but generally twenty-three students are on the island at one time. For students, BERC has several goals, according to Kristy Jones, the program manager: “To learn by experiencing different cultures and environments firsthand, to learn from other students and professors in other countries or geographic locations, and most important, they learn about themselves and how to deal with education in an informal setting.”

The academic programs allow experimental, activity-based learning in several fields, always with appropriate emphasis on cultural and trans-disciplinary aspects. Viewing ecology in the broadest sense allows science to meld with various subjects having cross-cultural and international relevance. The island habitat promotes discussions of links among biology, geology, geography, history, and society. Resource ownership and use, social contracts, and political and religious attitudes all become aspects of “ecology” when applied to questions of biodiversity, bio-prospecting, cultural property rights, conservation and preservation, and other current topics in the general field of environmental science. By placing these topics in a specific locale, they are interrelated, and all the BERC partners have knowledge, insight, and perspectives to contribute. Luther Brown, former director of BERC, notes “community members regularly stop to visit students, both within BERC and anywhere in the community. Community members regularly make suggestions about classes, and act as resource people for classes and research projects. Indeed, classes at BERC can expect local citizens to become engaged in discussions of ecological, historical, and cultural issues . . . In addition, dinnertime becomes an opportunity for BERC users to interact directly with community members. These simple interactions often lead to more involved discussions or projects. The upshot of this involvement is a sense that BERC users are part of the greater community, a sense that grows directly from the feeling that community members are part of BERC” (Brown 131).

NCC offerings at BERC include “Cultural Studies on Andros Island,” a multidisciplinary course, led by Karen Misencik, exploring the social, cultural, historical, and ecological components of Andros Island with an emphasis on how the human community interacts with the environment. This interaction may

When allowed to offer their perspective, the students became both a partner and a mediator in the discussions. Offering students this authority means that faculty must think freshly and imaginatively about recognizing roles and creating structures for learning and service. The success stories here are generally the result of years of work, building personal networks, accumulating social trust, and setting shared goals. The learning community structure allows for the faculty participation to be substantial enough—both in time and in the number of faculty members involved—to have a significant impact.

Out of these conversations grew a foundation of shared purposes and experiences, and the students began to appreciate the challenges of bridging academic culture and community action. As a result, they learned powerful lessons about the related but distinct forms of academic and experiential learning and about the difficulties and importance of collaboration among diverse groups.

include meeting with a local herbal healer and midwife; studying the ecological, sociological, and economic elements of bone fishing and sponge harvesting; experiencing cultural art such as woodcarving and basket weaving; investigating social structures in light of Bahamian myth and folklore; participating in community schools; and analyzing the legacy of colonialism. While studying the culture, students joined the citizenry in public work projects (<http://mason.gmu/~kmisencil>).

“Community Art,” a course taught by George Mason University faculty member Tom Ashcraft, is dependent upon a partnership of students and community residents. Together they have conceived and constructed three large public art projects. One project is a 15 ft. x 20 ft. mosaic tile mural of a conch on a BERC wall, and another is a 14 ft. concrete sculpture of a bonefish. Both of these animals are icons of life on the Bahamian Family Islands. Both involved study of the species under consideration, including presentations on the biology, economics, and social significance of the animals. The third project is an enormous sculptural bench, about 18 ft. long x 3 ft. wide x 2 ft. high. The bench overlooks one of the most scenic spots in the community, and it was sited in such a way that the parallel lines of the bench match the lines of the creek, the mangroves, and the sky. According to Luther Brown, “the bench took on political importance because it happened to be located at the same spot in which the local elders came to fish at night. These folks didn’t interact much with our students until the bench was underway, and then they actually came out to help apply the concrete and stake their claims to individual spots on the bench. It became something of a “dominos tree,” or a place for community discussion and decision-making, along the lines of the old town hall—without the hall. Demand became so great that Tom Ashcraft actually started two more benches that are still unfinished.”

A series of other courses have been formed around remodeling, stocking, and organizing a community library. The decision to build the library was the result of a delegation of local teachers asking BERC to work with them to create a community library. It also led to NCC staff and students obtaining, setting up, and maintaining older George Mason University computers for the library and some local classrooms. These projects both depend upon and further establish a trust that each member of the partnership has something to offer and something to gain.

Formal contracts and memos of understanding agreed upon by George Mason University, the College of the Bahamas, and the community of Staniard Creek outline the partnership responsibilities. Still, the Andros program is fragile because it is really based on the personal relationships of a few individuals on the island and at the university, built over years of respectful interaction. Without these relationships, the program has the potential of being another instance of colonization and a traditional field station among the natives. With the support of the few key university and community leaders, we have tried to foster customs and traditions of partnership among the visiting students, NCC staff, and the island residents. These habits become the social capital for sustaining a diverse community. Newcomers, especially faculty participants, need to understand the shared authority based on both common experience and different ways of knowing if they hope to participate in BERC.

Negotiating Roles in an Urban Alternative

New Century College has also been a partner in a community education project in Arlington County in northern Virginia. Named the “Urban Alternative,” and focused on a neighborhood elementary school and revitalized community center, the program attempts to rebuild and deepen a neighborhood identity as that integrated black and white neighborhood faces an influx of immigrants from Somalia, Cambodia, and Nicaragua; a move from home ownership to rental properties; and the looming pressures of gentrification at its borders. The NCC commitment—based on community-identified needs—is to mentor and coach elementary school students in an after-school enrichment or recreational program, staff a computer center in a large apartment building, support a voter registration drive, staff a senior center, help with ESL and citizenship classes for adults, and work in a child care and community center in a converted grocery store. Unintended results have been the formation of a PTA at the local elementary school and a tenants’ union at the neighborhood’s largest apartment complex (www.gmu.edu/departments/iet/urban.html).

The vehicle for NCC’s commitment is a six-credit learning community called “Neighborhood, Community, and Identity,” two credits of which are service-learning. It has been taught by an urban historian, a community psychologist, an anthropologist, and faculty members from education and conflict resolution. When the partnership first began and the new learning community was created, the faculty and students had to work through issues of authority as the faculty members came to understand the course involved a complex web of larger partnership. Not all of the initial faculty participants shared the view that “we move the academy away from seeing the community as a learning laboratory and toward viewing it as a partner in an effort to increase each other’s capacities and power.” (Mintz and Hesser 1996, 36). One result was that the students were negotiating their roles and responsibilities with community members as well as with their teachers. In addition, students found immediate relevance in their community work and began to doubt or question the value of the classroom study. The potential conflict was resolved through a series of honest dialogues with key community leaders and some faculty development around truly effective and sustained community-based research. Out of these conversations grew a foundation of shared purposes and experiences, and the students began to appreciate the challenges of bridging academic culture and community action. As a result, they learned powerful lessons about the related but distinct forms of academic and experiential learning and about the difficulties and importance of collaboration among diverse groups.

While the partnership is dependent upon a couple of very dedicated faculty members, a tireless visionary community activist, and a progressive elementary school administration, it is being strengthened by GMU students and youths in the community who have gained from the various activities and are now taking on new roles in community-building. They have participated in the successful Camp Alpha Adventure, a first collaboration between Glencarlyn Elementary School, Arlington County’s recreation department, and GMU to establish a

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summer program for children that was a hybrid of a summer school and a play camp; and the Arlington Mill Community Preschool, a collaboration between Arlington County's recreation department and GMU to provide a high-quality preschool experience for children in the neighborhood. With student assistance, the community center now has a community arts program and gallery, organized around community issues, and offers cross-ethnic and cross-generational learning activities.

The point is learning communities provide both the learning structure and the communal base to take on large public concerns. A six- to nine-credit learning community in New Century College provides enough time and depth for students to become immersed in details of complex issues. And when learning community participants are self-reflective about issues of roles and authority, the communal base becomes strong enough to explore more deeply diverse and divergent perspectives. With some continuity of faculty, staff, and community partners, a trust develops that encourages various co-curricular service activities and that allows a new semester to build upon the work of a previous semester.

Recognizing Expertise in the Digital Divide

“Crossing the Digital Divide Through Service-Learning” was an NCC project that brought together a Social Work class and a learning community on Internet Literacy (NCLC 249, <http://classweb.gmu.edu/montecin/nclc249-fool/exp-lrn-link.htm>) to develop technology transfer strategies for linking GMU students with community agencies through service-learning. As part of the course requirements, NCC students provided technology outreach to students at community sites to improve technology literacy in the community. The outreach ranged from issues of computer networks to basic training in Internet access and use. Virginia Montecino, the Internet Literacy faculty member, recognized some students' technical skills and knew that it was the social and cultural contexts of Internet literacy that students need to learn. Service-learning was an effective approach to make technical proficiency useful, while raising questions about “useful to whom and for what?” She required students to do some projects for a non-profit organization, e.g., community computer learning centers and local libraries. Montecino explained, “They teach kids computer skills, demonstrate Internet research, and help senior citizens discover the wonders of the Internet, and I stress the fact that because we are privileged to have the opportunity to learn and use this technology we should pass the knowledge on to help empower others. Many of our students assume that everyone has access to this technology. They rarely think about the literacy involved in using the Internet or the economic factors related to access.”

In this case, the students' technical expertise gave them a particular standing in the community. They learned how expertise brings a certain authority, but that technical expertise is only part of the knowledge needed for computer use in a community setting. They faced issues of privacy, standards of behavior, and commercialism that are fundamental to sustaining a democratic community. As one student remarked, “They wanted me to decide whether kids could play games on their computers and make sure they weren't copying songs with

Napster.” The classroom becomes an important space for reflection upon broader issues of expertise and authority, including—not incidentally—expertise and authority in the classroom itself.

Employing Undergraduate Teaching Assistants

Not all New Century learning communities are based on a community partnership. An example of a campus-based learning community with an integral service-learning component is “Gender and Violence,” an eight-credit offering with two of the credits in service-learning. Beyond the profound importance and immediacy of the subject, this course is interesting as another instance of the multiple roles for faculty and students when service is integrated into the program. Through the use of undergraduate teaching assistants, the faculty have taken advantage of another sort of student expertise and found a way to encourage a greater range of student voices.

Some of the broad themes, discussed in the course are theories of violence; social construction of gender; youth culture (gangs and school violence); the control of women’s bodies (female genital mutilation, abortion, and forced sterilization); family violence and sexual assault (domestic and child abuse, date rape, and male-on-male rape); violence and sports; and media representations of violence. A critical component to the overall structure of the learning community is the focus on service-learning and the link that is created between theory and practice. All students volunteer for ninety hours in a pre-approved site, on- or off-campus, such as the Sexual Assault Services Office on campus, a victim-assistance hotline, a school for troubled youth, or the criminal justice system. These community placements have proven to be one of the highlights of the learning community and the loci of significant learning.

Given the sensitive subject matter and the intensity of the service-learning experiences, the faculty members, Kimberly K. Eby and Paula R. Gilbert, thought that the use of undergraduate TAs might be an effective way to approach some of the concerns, because of the value of peer mentoring in collaborative learning contexts. The TAs, who had previously taken the course, could model responses to the experiences while also possibly being more approachable for the new students. Using undergraduate TAs, however, raised other problems. According to Eby and Gilbert,

We considered issues of multiple roles and setting boundaries. NCC is a small, close-knit community. Using undergraduates as TAs invited the possibility that whomever we selected to participate in this more authoritative role would have friends and acquaintances in the classroom. In addition, they may be enrolled in another learning community with some of these same students. Therefore, we would need to have explicit discussions and open lines of communication with the TAs about dealing with these multiple roles and the potential boundary conflicts that could arise. Similarly, and of equal importance, we felt, that we had to make sure that the students enrolled in Violence and Gender felt comfortable with the students chosen as TAs. (Eby and Gilbert 2000, 131)

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The sensitive planning and decisions worked out well. The faculty, students, and TAs each found significant value in the arrangement. In a class survey, 90 percent of the students “felt comfortable discussing issues in their [TAs’] presence, and 93 percent agreed that they [TAs] effectively helped to facilitate classroom discussion. However, follow-up interviews suggested that the attitudes toward the TAs’ help was more complex than a simple survey question could capture. For instance, some students appreciated the TAs because they could help solve group problems that might be better solved by the group itself” (Eby and Gilbert 2000, 140). The faculty found much to like about the structure, especially the mentoring of and meetings with the TAs and insights the TAs offered about course materials and teaching strategies. They warn, however, that having TAs is not a “time-saver;” it is just the opposite. It appears that the undergraduate TAs, in part because of their in-between status, gained the most. They had an opportunity to revisit a course that had been a powerful experience previously, while also having a new perspective on faculty learning and teaching.

Other New Century College learning communities have a significant service-learning component; the ones described here are of particular interest because they highlight how the combination of these two pedagogies can create new challenges and opportunities for students. Our involved faculty members are finding that the interaction of the classroom community and the service community can help students develop a sense of personal efficacy coupled with the recognition of the importance of communal action. They are also convinced that this experience is strengthened when students are given a real say, along with community partners and faculty, in identifying the activities in service-learning. For example, in the “Urban Alternative,” students were initially caught between the faculty research objectives and community goals. When allowed to offer their perspective, the students became both a partner and a mediator in the discussions. Offering students this authority means that faculty must think freshly and imaginatively about recognizing roles and creating structures for learning and service. The success stories here are generally the result of years of work, building personal networks, accumulating social trust, and setting shared goals. The learning community structure allows for the faculty participation to be substantial enough—both in time and in the number of faculty members involved—to have a significant impact. New Century College has been fortunate to have the wherewithal to recognize these complex faculty roles and to understand the power of service-learning in shaping democratic practice.

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Postscript

In 2002-03, changes have come to the Andros Island program that underscore the important point about collaboration based upon trust and personal relationships. With the departure of the George Mason University program director and the reorganization of New Century College into the George Mason University College of Arts and Sciences, the Bahamas Environmental Research Center has been closed, and the community partnerships are facing considerable legal and bureaucratic challenges.