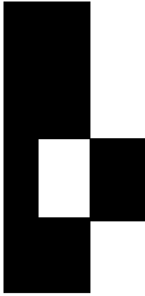

Ruptura: Acknowledging the Lost Subjects of the Service Learning Story

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> I am sure that one of the most tragic illnesses in our society is the bureaucratization of the mind. If you go beyond the previously established patterns, considered as inevitable ones, you lose credibility. In fact, however, there is no creativity without *ruptura*, without a break from the old, without conflict in which you have to make a decision. I would say there is no human existence without ruptura (38, emphasis added).
>
> —Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*

As members of the Service Learning collective in the Writing Program at Syracuse University, we have been actively designing and teaching a sequence of undergraduate writing courses that integrate community service in various ways — by asking students to write *about* the non-profit agencies where they participate, to write *for* those sites by producing brochures and websites, and to write *with* people as tutors in adult literacy programs or in local urban high schools.[1]

Along with the successes, we have encountered recurring challenges: In what ways do we intellectually and politically frame the service learning requirement? How do we write course rationales? How do we encourage students to talk in the classroom about their experiences? How do we theorize the ethical and rhetorical complexities of student volunteers as they represent people at the sites, many of whom may differ from the students in significant ways? Is reciprocity a main goal of service learning?[2] What sorts of reciprocities can and do (and do not) emerge? What disjunctures and crises, or ruptura, occur when the ideals of service

learning are put into practice? How can we as teachers, students, and community participants acknowledge them?

After several semesters of teaching community-based classes, we notice our students (and selves) challenging the comfortable narratives (e.g., accounts of reciprocal learning, tallies of student service hours or monies raised) in service learning discourses and recognizing moments when neatly planned activities fall away, rupture. It is in moments such as these that we (teachers and students) experience what Paulo Freire named ruptura, a conflict that forces us to make a decision, to act, to break away from the old and familiar. Rather than finding tidy answers to our questions in existing service learning theories of reciprocity and representation, we advocate a rhetoric of acknowledgement across community service learning relationships, an articulation of the tensions that occur when we require that students leave the classroom and go into various neighborhoods and non-profit agencies.

As students meet people and enter places that put pressure on their sense of who they are and how the world is, we set in motion processes of identification and disidentification, moments of comfort and discomfort. Risky encounters such as these mark not only service learning but also the project of education more generally. As teacher-scholars, we need always to attend to the ways narratives of progress structure our understanding of what we do and of what students learn, narratives that make it difficult to recognize the anxieties, fears, and conflicts that are also so much a part of the story. In acknowledging the tensions that arise out of these service learning pedagogies, a method of collaborative inquiry emerges. We not only attend to traditional structures of representing 'others,' but also call them in question by refracting one story with another.

As writing teachers, we notice that these struggles often emerge at the point when students have to write about their service learning site and experiences – that is, when they face the very real responsibility of representing for academic consumption events and people they are just beginning to get to know. In the following reflective class writing, Kaye, a first-year student, discusses her struggle to compose a descriptive and analytical profile of the afterschool program she worked with:[3]

> Here I am trying to fulfill the requirements of this portfolio and my mind draws a blank. This is not to say that I have nothing to write about; I just don't know what I feel good writing about and what I think should not be brought across on paper. I know that some experiences are ones that I want to tell about and at the same time I don't feel right telling them . . . . [I realize that] I am not someone who feels comfortable

> writing about other people. . . . I do not like the idea of creating an image or situation for [others] to picture in their mind. If this were to be fictional, I could create enough work to keep you reading for hours but I cannot find a way to honestly show you who these people are because they are just that, people. . . . I [have] tried not to just define these people as characters but show them to you as they are, real people that made me think (Kaye Berube).[4]

This student self-consciously and responsibly grapples with the temptation to merely textualize the people at her site, to see them as characters. Moments like this interrupt the safety of a printed syllabus, skew the trajectory of a carefully crafted assignment, and make all kinds of problems visible. Fundamental to the process of learning, because they put in motion – and keep in motion — the situated, complex, and difficult (re)learning that educators locate at the center of all pedagogy, rupturas like these become a method of acknowledging the project of critical education in the world.[5]

In this essay we turn to the crisis of representation in ethnography and to stories of rupturas from our own experiences as service learning teachers to explore the discursive, institutional, and psychological reasons why these breaks may be difficult to analyze, easy to suture over, and necessary for understanding the intellectual project of service learning theory and pedagogy.

Representing (and Being Represented by) Others

Ethnographers have been confronted for years with the awesome responsibility of representing others; of making sense of what they have seen, were told, or read in their sites; and then of making it available for distant readers. One telling account of this struggle is Margery Wolf's *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism & Ethnographic Responsibility* (1992). In this book Wolf describes how she stumbled upon a short story she had written about events in the spring of 1960, which had occurred while she was living with her anthropologist husband in a small village in northern Taiwan. Having forgotten the story, she then searched through old files for her original field notes and personal journals from that period of time, and discovered they told different stories. In her book, she acknowledges how the telling of these stories has changed for several reasons: she is now an anthropologist herself; questions of reflexivity now preoccupy the discipline; problems of appropriation and representation now undermine the very project of the discipline. Indeed some postmodern critics have challenged the very possibility of ethically representing others, while other critics have claimed that the ethnographic

process itself "is an exercise in colonialism" (p. 5). In order to further explore this complex problem and to argue that these criticisms should make feminist ethnographers more aware and careful but should not stop them altogether, Wolf presents three texts she wrote about this one event (the short story, her unanalyzed field notes, and an essay she published in American Ethnologist), with commentaries that illustrate and argue with the problems and promises "this new period of reflexivity [have] brought to the fore" (p. 7).

The differences and conflicts and problems of representation and responsibility that haunt ethnographic encounters also trouble community activism and service learning.

Robert Coles (1993), for example, recounts how Ruth Ann, a nine-year old girl in a 4th grade composition class he was teaching, challenged his assumptions about himself, when she asked questions like, "We were wondering why you come over here to us. We thought, he must be busy with his regular life, so why does he take time out to come visit here, when he could be someplace else that's more important . . . . Did you hear something bad about us?" (Coles, p. xvii.). Her questions unsettled his "well-intentioned, earnest affirmation of good intent," forcing him to construct in his mind "a devastating critique of myself and my kind – confirming her uncompromising appraisal of me as yet another slummer, eager to wet his feet in a fashionably different terrain, all the more to inflate his sense of himself and the view others had of him" (p. xvii). Linda Flower (1996) demonstrates too the hard work of negotiating differences through her analysis of the community/university collaboration between Pittsburgh's Community House and The Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy at Carnegie Mellon. She discusses how incommensurate discourses across lines of difference may make a shared social reality impossible, a deeper reciprocity unlikely (p. 66). Participants have to be willing to persist with conflict, with a sustained engagement with multiple voices and perspectives, where there will be no "master narrative that resolves the complexity into a unified, thematic story" (p. 88).

Both ethnography and community activism depend upon moving into intersubjective relationships with others across lines of difference, relationships fraught with anxiety, frustration, partial communication, rough spots and tough times.

We have to remain alert to the power asymmetries and different discursive and material realities of the people involved in community-based projects. We risk confusing our ethical and political desires for reciprocal and mutually beneficial relations with the much messier realities that those relations often (re)enact. We risk masking rather than unmasking power dynamics. We risk mis-recognizing our own desires and needs. If we move too quickly toward discursive constructions such as the reci-

procity narrative, which then suture over these difficulties, we risk *fixing* complexities rather than *acknowledging* them as central to and part of learning.

In Wolf's tradition of thrice told tales, we seek ways to structure methods into our service learning courses that offer ample opportunity to tell *and retell* the many diverse stories of service learning – by giving voice to the visceral and frightening, by holding off easy answers, by acknowledging the unhappy as well as happy endings, by questioning our selves and own positionality, by developing self-reflexive ways of receiving stories — that is, by excavating the lost subjects.[6]

Margaret's story: 'Requiring' Transformation

> ". . . to excavate the lost subjects in a story until what is uncanny can be engaged" (p. 15)
>
> — Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects*

There are several familiar versions of the service learning story. In one, "students will come to recognize their privilege and in the sad, troubled lives of others find that they, by contrast, are still living in the land of the free, the home of the brave. Armed with a point of light, they will lead just one person, often a very cute child, out of the darkness their parents willfully cast her into . . . . They will feel compassion and wish life were better for those they serve" (Stanley, p. 60). This caricature of what some call 'volunteerism lite' points to the concern that students will enact charity as a kinder and gentler form of imperialism rather than as a starting point for a systemic analysis of the social. Nothing changes structurally: the poor stay poor, the privileged stay privileged. Or, in another version of the story, students come to recognize the value of conflict and difference, enter the contact zone, and come to embrace the different meanings of an apparently shared experience, as they may "move from the academic armchair of liberal goodwill or radical critique to an intercultural collaboration" (Flower, p. 45).

These stories focus on endings, and may say more about teachers' expectations than about all that happens to student volunteers. We foreclose important possibilities when we tell the service learning story teleologically, especially in terms of final or failed transformations.

I propose that we look instead at other moments in the service learning experience: when the volunteers or community members do not like each other, when volunteers resent the time they are forced to give up, when participants develop antipathies that don't make their way to consciousness, when students have visceral reactions to their sites, and so on. The student volunteer may hate being the only white person in the

room, or community participants may resent the superior attitude of the kids who come 'off the hill' to 'help' them as 'role models.' Lots of scenarios come to mind. But it would be 'uncivil' or 'ungrateful' for service learning participants to admit to any of these things. Thus the public discourse of service itself – "giving back to the community" or "helping others" or "forming partnerships" – may make the problem worse. One way to avoid these discomforting feelings is to cover them over with the language of altruism, which provides a defense against the depth and complexity of feelings and responses evoked by the service learning experience.

How do we get students to talk about these difficult subjects in the classroom? How do we get ourselves to? How might we have conversations with community participants about the complexities of these encounters?

As I reflect back on the syllabus for my service learning course last fall (WRT 105: Citizenship, the Narrative Imagination, and Good Writing), I'm struck by the problematic way I too cast the service learning story. The syllabus was eight pages long. To set up the course rationale, I first pulled seven quotations from the local paper that illustrate discord along lines of difference (e.g., the controversy over the Boy Scouts and homosexuality, federal hate crime legislation, the skirmishes between India and Pakistan). I raised questions about how we come to know others in an increasingly media-saturated world where figures such as "the welfare mother" or "the Islamic militant" or "violent teen superpredator" serve as our only reference points. Then I proposed three hypotheses for us to test through the service experience and through our discussion of course readings such as Benjamin Barber's "Teaching Democracy through Community Service" and "Bowling Alone" by Robert D. Putnam: [1] fundamental to questions of citizenship and to good writing is respecting others as capable and contributing members of a multicultural society, [2] the act of narration is a basic way that we understand ourselves and others, and [3] service learning is one way to accomplish the civic learning necessary for a multicultural democracy. It took me four pages to lay out these hypotheses. I defined students as citizens and rhetors, who must recognize "others . . . . without denigrating . . . differences or reducing [them] to caricature." I argued for cultural narratives that do not "perpetuate hegemonic power relations, social injustice, and material inequity." I relied on discourses of abstract values like "good citizenship" and "good rhetors" — and so on and so on.

In retrospect, I read my own syllabus as defensive, addressed not only to my students, but also to other audiences – teachers in the Writing Program who openly question the value/s of service learning (which they see as unpaid labor, as irrelevant to the teaching of writing, etc.), parents

who might not think service could be a serious part of academic study, other service learning practitioners whom I had been reading and among whom I wanted to locate myself. I see too the high handed moralism of the discourse, which explains how students did come to read the course as about becoming "better" people – with "better" coming to mean not selfish, not lazy, not morally indifferent, not immature (if class debates are any indication).

Students resisted the terms by which the syllabus interpellated them. They were right.

The discourse of my syllabus addressed the superego: it just wasn't okay to be 'good enough' students and volunteers.[7] We had to be spectacular. I was calling for the heroic, the utopic, the patriotic in a way, out of my own anxiety about justifying service learning in a first year writing course for the first time. I locked us into a very particular discourse of service learning, which addressed students in moralistic ways, which they could either accept or reject, but not easily or openly negotiate. On the first day of class I expected students to challenge the 20 hour service requirement. Instead, they sat there, silent, passive, obedient. A very serious student who fretted, "But what if nothing happens to us at our sites" initially raised the only concern. He recognized that transformation and moral improvement – not just 20 hours of service – was being required.

Ironically, of course, it is this very discourse of moralism that keeps everyone in their socio-economic place and that perpetuates the status quo – and that undermines the very project I tried to initiate. The privileged continue to enjoy their privilege because they have now taken time out of their busy lives to help those less fortunate than themselves, and the less privileged feel, or ought to feel, gratitude.

I might now tell the story of the service learning rebellion, which happened slowly and quietly over the course of the semester, as students couldn't find time to get to their sites, as they argued that required service was "forced volunteerism" and so not volunteerism at all, as they crabbed about the transportation problems, etc. Yet when I encouraged a class debate, students withdrew from any invested discussion or alternative projects. Some students completed the service requirement (some very 'successfully'), while most barely squeezed in enough hours to have something to write about and to not flunk the course.

But what I want to consider here is how to write my next syllabus. What discourses will I draw on – and why?[8] What if I say something like, "Students will donate 20 hours of their time to overworked and understaffed not-for-profits, which will give us in return more to talk about and more to write about, as we study the many arguments for and against service learning." Would that be a way to avoid demanding 'a learning' or

'a service learning narrative'? Or would it be possible to start the course by asking students to workshop the syllabus and develop and debate 'our' course rationale – and then return to it across the semester for discussion, analysis, critique, qualification? Or would it be productive to provide many rationales – mine, service learning theorists, the community non-profits? That is, how can I get the course started without trying to 'fix' the meaning of the service learning ahead of time?

More importantly, how can I resist my own teacherly impulses to write 'the' narrative of the course? How can I resist the rescue fantasy "that education can be made from the proper teacher, the proper curriculum, or the proper pedagogy so that learning will be no problem to the actors involved"? (Britzman, p. 5). How can I open up space, for myself and for students, to recognize the anxieties, fears, contradictions, and conflicts that are always already a part of the education narrative?

Tracy's story: If Children are Homework, What am I?[9]

> "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if your liberation is bound with mine, then let us work together."
>
> — Sadie Brower Neakok

One afternoon, about six weeks into the semester, as my freshman writing course, Literacy and Community[10], was ending, a student reluctantly lingered behind. Bright and creative, she was typically outspoken, so I was quite surprised when she hesitated to speak. Her words, which appear in a paper she eventually wrote, capture the essence of our discussion:

> "The first time I saw this place I was taken aback. My naïveté had me envisioning brightly colored walls, toys and everything else I had while I was growing up. I was out of my element from the very beginning. Even before viewing the facility, I had been uneasy with the knowledge of what I must do to complete my Writing 105 course. It was disconcerting to my sensibilities that I would be working here for 20 hours over the next few months, and then I inevitably would be leaving, never to see these kids again. How could this possibly be fair to them? What exactly were they to me? A homework assignment? I began to wonder if it affected the kids to see so many volunteers come through the organization about the same time each year, and then to watch as the workers dwindled

back down to permanent employees as the holiday season neared."

As her words carefully and tentatively rolled off of her tongue, I sensed how difficult this conversation was for her. Margaret Dana Singsen[11] knew she was revealing something that would make her vulnerable – as a student, as a community participant, as a human being. But despite the risks involved in confronting her teacher, an authority who had both put her in this position and would eventually assign her a grade, Dana was committed deeply to expressing the discomfort, the conflict she felt with the community project she was charged with. Her bold critique implicated nearly every institutional structure she was working within – the course, the Center for Public and Community Service, the community agency itself.

During the private moments of our conversation, I listened. I admired. I heard.

How could I invite and sanction such a troubled practice? What right did I have to push students into such anxiety-ridden moral dilemmas? To encourage such a potentially careless mis-use of others? How does this affect the children?

How could I not invite and sanction such active participation in the community? What right did I have to refuse precious resources to community agencies that depend in part upon the university? To deny students and children in the community opportunities to cross the often sharply drawn lines between communities of difference, to forge human relationships, to become active learners both inside and outside of the classroom?

She was surprised, I think, when I not only admitted that I shared her concerns, but also invited her to bring them into the classroom, to make them public, and to allow others to consider them. As far as she knew, her peers had bought into the celebratory discourse of community service. No one else had spoken out against the ways that it had been framed in our course syllabus, the university's mission statement, any of the agency mission statements, the public media, or political propaganda. In these documents, service was good. Dana believed that if she spoke up, she might stand alone.

Students did not necessarily disagree with Dana's concerns. Many were also frustrated, confused, or shocked by their experiences in the community. They did not, however, take up her request to consider the ethical implications of the community work that was required of them. Instead they saw the space she opened up as an invitation to share their own rupturas – the moments of anxiety, conflict, or discomfort they were experiencing.

One student, for example, who was working at the same agency as Dana, told us of a young child who had endearingly latched herself onto her leg, refusing to let go. While the student was a little surprised by the child's behavior, she was even more stunned by the agency director's response – punishment. Other students at the agency corroborated this story by sharing others that illustrated the director's strict policy about any physical contact.

How could a child be punished for seeking out affection?

Amidst a clamor of horrified voices, a single voice emerged. It suggested that maybe the director was worried about the children getting too attached to people who would soon leave the agency and them. The voice was Dana's.

"Say more about that," I urged.

Reiterating her concern with the inevitable reality that she would be leaving the agency at the end of the semester – *if children are homework, what am I?* – she explained that her ideological resistance to the project itself would not permit her to initiate or accept any human contact. Though she desperately felt the need to reach out and hug a child, it was because of her concerns for the children that she resisted her human urges.

The class was silent.

A student working at a different agency whispered, "I hug the children," and like water being released from a dam, others joined her. Louder now, she added, "They need love. They need to know we care."

Dana's brow wrinkled. I asked the class, "Why?"

Students retorted with predictable and troubling claims about disadvantaged children, unfortunate home lives, broken homes, and poor people. The pervasive belief seemed to be that the kids they were working with — because they wore the same clothes every day, ate food voraciously, and/or smelled like they weren't bathed often — needed their love and affection because they "don't get it at home."

This time my brow wrinkled. *What assumptions are embedded in those claims?* I raised a litany of questions: "Why are you assuming that the kids you are working with are not getting love and affection at home? What do you mean by love and affection? What makes you claim that children need it? Need it the way you give it? Need it from transient volunteers?"

As students recalled stories of their own early childhoods – the small private daycare programs staffed with doting, trained professionals, the loving relationships they developed with live-in nannies, the comfort of knowing a parent would be waiting after-school – a theme emerged: students were making assumptions about the non-profit agencies they worked with based upon their own personal experiences. As one student proclaimed, "This is how I grew up and look where I am now!"

This was a difficult discussion.

As the next few weeks passed, students wrote journals and a series of mini-essays, one-two page papers that described different aspects of their community agencies.[12] The culminating assignment asked them to compose an agency profile, a five-seven page paper, which synthesized and expanded upon the writing they had already done. They were asked not to just describe the agency, but also to discuss why and how it functioned as it did.

I brought an agency profile written by a former student for the class to consider and discuss. They were appalled. One student exclaimed, “She’s not telling it like it is. She’s evaluating it based upon her own middle-class upbringing.” He went on, joined by others, to observe that while she described the agency, its members, and what happened during her visits, she did not explore deeply enough why the agency needed to respond to the community and function the way that it did based upon what the community itself valued and needed. They felt that the essay was more about the student writer than the agency and people she worked with.

Things were getting complicated; they were getting more interesting. *Did Dana set this important discussion into motion?* I looked forward to reading their profiles. I looked forward especially to Dana’s.

Like many of her classmates, Dana did not really write an agency profile. Her paper started by describing the ways she reacted to and interacted with the agency and proceeded to narrate her process of coming to know and understand the community she was working with. And while she did reveal many details about the agency and its members in this section, the ‘profile’ itself really began several pages later when she wrote:

> And then it dawned on me that [the agency director] shared many of the same feelings about volunteers as I did. She too knew that this was a class obligation, and that we would be leaving just as abruptly as we had come.

As the rest of her paper unfolded, she identified and illustrated unwritten policies which forbade physical contact between children and volunteers; which intentionally rotated volunteers through different activities and age-grouped rooms; and which encouraged older children to become mentors and university volunteers to become facilitators who ran activities, but did not necessarily participate in them. Dana, like many of her classmates, needed to look inside of herself, to talk about and write about what she saw on the inside, before she could profile what she saw and experienced on the outside.

I have a lot to learn from this class and from Dana. Why did this group of students critique their peers for writing themselves into the communities they worked with, yet, in the end, in at least some ways, produce that kind of writing themselves? What am I asking of students when I assign an agency profile? What are they telling me they need instead? As I consider these questions in the context of the narrative I have just shared, I realize the need to reframe the writing assignments I impose upon students, assignments which require them to achieve scholarly distance from their communities just as they are imagining ways to locate themselves within them.

As I plan my revisions, I am compelled to flip through pages of student writing; Dana's writing in particular has influenced me deeply. Over the course of the semester she told many stories: stories about herself, stories about herself in the community, stories about others in the community, stories about how she read her community, stories about reading herself. None of her narratives, however, tell 'the real story'; none of them are complete. My students join Wolf in teaching me that all stories can only ever be partial narratives, and remind me that I cannot, and should not, expect or even desire 'the real, complete story' from students.

Tobi's story: Into the Community[13]

Ruptura #1

"She came once, was afraid to touch the children and got on her cell phone to get a ride home."

— Community evaluation form, fall 1999

This assessment came from the daycare center director at the end of the semester. I've gone over again and again how I could have recognized this student's experience earlier. None of her papers reflected this lack of engagement; in fact, they pointed to investment. She wrote passionately about the lack of screening and safety precautions required for volunteers. I knew that she hadn't spent as much time in the community as her peers, but it wasn't until the last day of the class that I realized something was really wrong.

This student taught me a valuable lesson. If I were to continue teaching service learning courses, a shift had to occur. I hadn't realized clearly enough what students might be going through even though I'd been a volunteer at one organization or another for much of my life. I needed to understand the frustration and excitement my students were writing about in their journals, what it felt like to carve twenty hours out of a semester in a new and uncomfortable setting, and, most importantly,

why this student had identified and argued an agency issue, fulfilling all of my assignments, without spending more than one hour at 'her' site. The only contact I had with agency placements came in the form of a brief evaluation at the end of the course. It was not enough. As I struggle to find ways to understand the experience of students like this one, I am reminded of the lake at my childhood home.

> *I grew up in rural Wisconsin, in a place, as my father says, where most people come to vacation. There is a lake and acres of land. The seasons marked our activities, and, as autumn turned to winter, the lake changed, the water freezing in interestingly layered configurations. And while wind or snow robbed us of a see-through clarity most years, windows into these depths did appear. Sunburst shapes ranging from the size of a quarter to a bowling ball offered dark openings through which to examine a silent lily pad, the dappled sand bottom. Inevitably, our breath would steam the holes, blur our vision.*

Like those frosted icy windows, my experience in the service learning classroom became clouded with questions of representation, authority, and inexperience as students began raising ethical questions in journals and essays and as the evaluations from agencies came in. I decided if I was to understand the complexities of the task I was engaging my students in, the coded language in their writing, I needed to occupy a place in the community along with them. If we were going to talk about and study the community in class, I too had to be in the community. It wasn't enough to rely on the university placement office and their writing; I had to redefine boundaries with students.

I began working with an adult and family literacy center about a year ago.

Ruptura #2

Since, like many of the Syracuse students, time dictated the hours I could spend at the center, the volunteer coordinator paired me with another tutor. She worked with our student Ann[14] on GED-level reading skills, and I was to follow with a half-hour of writing tutoring each Tuesday. The volunteer coordinator suggested I meet the reading tutor to discuss how we might support each other, and I agreed, certain that tutor collaboration could maximize Ann's chances of passing the GED. I was also interested in meeting a long-time volunteer tutor, in looking for

mentoring, as I imagined my students might as they encountered established site volunteers and staff members.

Except the reading tutor didn't want to meet me. She wouldn't shake my hand or even look at me directly. Eyeing the tape recorder in my hand, she would have nothing to do with what she saw as a university researcher coming down from the hill to study this student, this center, and her.

I was stunned. Why wouldn't she meet me? Was it because of the difference in our education? She was being tutored in math while she tutored Ann in reading. Was it because I looked young, like a college student? She was in her forties. Was it because I looked too white? She was an African American. Was it somehow class-based? I had dressed in my casual teaching clothes. She wore jewelry and painted nails. What had I done? This had never happened before.

Was this the kind of experience my students were having? What had I done in the classroom to prepare them for this? I went home and journaled, writing through my anxieties of rejection. My students were required to maintain one journal page per community hour, but these were collected only three times over the semester. This hardly seemed the most effective way to bring these issues into the classroom. How could I use these moments to teach?

Ruptura #3

> *Journal entry: Can we please just work on writing?*
>
> *I went to the center today a little late, around 5:40 by the time I got there. I find myself very cognizant of the time I'm occupying with Ann. I know that she expects to be able to leave by 6pm. I know that her daughter needs to go home, to get away from school. The curious thing is that this time I didn't want her stories of child suicide and the emergency room. I didn't need them the way I did the last few times. I had been willing, even eager, to take on some of her emotional weight before, but today I was tired. I had my own problems. I really just wanted to think about how adult literacy could work, about writing. What am I saying? I already feel guilty for sort of experimenting with different strategies 'on' her, and now I'm rejecting her stories? Her need to share her life with me? How can I even write this? How would Ann feel about this representation?*

As I drafted my story for this essay, this particular telling elicited lots of response. “Explore what you mean when you say you didn’t *need* her stories.” “Yes, the courting ritual of coming to know someone demands this sort of engagement.” “Say more about Ann — where does she enter this conversation?” In many ways, their retelling of my story—a retelling itself—has had a paralyzing effect. Which one should I tell?

> *The one about a teacher-scholar needing affirmation outside the university?* Like students who long for ‘real world’ experience, I needed Ann’s stories because I needed to get off campus, to ground a world of literacy theory in a world of place and practice. Ann’s stories offered me a way to renew my faith in myself as a teacher, to legitimize my place at the university in the world.
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> *The moment when I couldn’t hear any more of Ann’s stories because I couldn’t stop dreaming them at night?* I couldn’t stop retelling myself her stories. I lived them again and again as I struggled to come to terms with middle-class guilt and resist trying to find solutions. I couldn’t sleep for weeks.
>
> *The one about using story to teach writing and then switching gears when that didn’t work?* Ann and I listened to her stories. We tape recorded them and wrote them down. I wanted her to feel the same investment in writing that I wished for my students. I thought the stories might be a way in. They certainly shocked and ‘invested’ me. My own distance from the material reality of her life was undeniable. She talked of slum landlords and lost security deposits; I listened, talked to her about how learning to write might help her fight the system. Then it stopped working. The stories became our time together. As much as she needed a listener, she also needed a reading and writing teacher. Soon thereafter, we devoted the first few minutes of each encounter to talk and then turned to her books and writing assignments.
>
> *The moment of fascination turned to boredom?* In many ways my journal reveals a fascination, a rapture, with the stories the site had to tell, a collection of lives so different that voyeuristic participation was almost too much to bear. I couldn’t help but desire membership. But eventually those feelings subsided. What happens when comfort/discomfort is brought back into equilibrium? Like the ice holes that are inevitably abandoned after a couple of days for the thrill of another winter activity, our experiences in the community risk

> becoming 'average,' burden instead of novelty. This introduces a new crisis: boredom. Is this the point at which students turn in blank entries? How can I help them understand that comfort doesn't mean that there is nothing left to write about?
>
> *The story of false stability?* As I came to know Ann and her stories, as we developed our own rituals and methods of interaction, I recognized a sense of stability in my place at the center. And yet stability is the last label that comes to mind as I characterize how service learning relationships exist in my classroom. It is difficult for students, teachers and community participants to escape the reality of our transient roles, the physical migration between the community and classroom in a short fifteen-week season.

How can I/we tell these stories? How do I encourage students to choose? What do I do with the journals my students turn in? As I redesign curriculum, which story do I ask for next? Like Margaret and Tracy, I need to ask this question again and again.

Ruptura #4

As I grapple with this cacophony of voices, I'm realizing that Ruptura #3 is really just a small part of Ruptura #4, a questioning. Where do I locate ruptura? Was it in the act of journaling — is that where I allowed myself to pause between my knowing and the unknown? Was it in the questions of my essay-writing peers? Is it caught somewhere between my retellings? How can I help students get hold of these things, name them? How can we learn from them? Amid the choice and trauma of retelling, we can come to understand the complexities of the relationships — student-student, student-community, student-writing — service learning pedagogies and practices develop. In the chaos, a method begins to emerge.

And so ruptura becomes a constant rebirth of the telling, and I'm back to ice. Conditions affect what was once clarity all season long, but, in the end, there is movement. Pools of water form along the surface. Sharp cracks ripple into fracture as the sun dapples in physics, challenges a solid into flux, reintroducing the chaos of motion. I'm wrong about the windows. Rupturas aren't about clearing the frost away. Rupturas melt ice, shift the shape of what we know into what we can know. That, then, is my goal as a service learning teacher of writing, to help students engage in the act of ruptura without reaching for a cell phone.

Toward a Conclusion: Acknowledging Ruptura

The method we are developing for recognizing the value/s of ruptura in our service learning writing classes follows from Wolf's trope of thrice told tales: we are using representation to understand representation.

We are arguing that service learning courses should not be measured by one narrative, one paper alone, one final account. Rather, multiple narratives, together with journals and other notes, should be set side by side, seen as partial pieces of an unfolding inquiry and reflected upon not as finished products, but as layers of coming to know and understand. By varying the genre and the audience, by analyzing stories collectively, by excavating the less visible or even hidden dimensions of the story (like the unacknowledged audiences), we understand texts as polyvocal, contextual, always meaning more and always meaning less than writers intend.

We are advocating for a method of narrative refraction – not treating stories as foundational, but as complex, meaningful, ongoing events that can be told and retold to keep learning and teaching in motion.

Recognizing ruptura allows us to resist the master narratives of service learning, reciprocity, happy endings, and the public discourse of activisms. Representing ruptura through telling and retelling makes visible the ways service learning is a contested terrain, a complex social, economic, and political field, in which all participants face challenging interpersonal interactions and representational responsibilities. In acknowledging ruptura, we locate these struggles – the ways course rationales interpellate students, the ways students negotiate service learning assignments, the ways we have to choose which stories to tell – at the heart of the intellectual project of service learning and critical experiential education.

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Notes

[1] We recognize here the work of Tom Deans (*Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Compositon*, NCTE, in press) and Linda Adler-Kassner ("Inner Landscapes, Outer Worlds: Mapping the Territory of Service-Learning and Composition." Keynote, Spring Conference, Writing Program, Syracuse University, Feb. 1999), and the support we have received for these courses from the Center for Public and Community Service and from the University Vision Fund for improving teaching and learning at Syracuse University. For more information and to read our course syllabi, see our website at (http://wrt.syr.edu/service.html).

[2] Barbara Jacoby, in her well-known book, *Service Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*, for example, defines service learning as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community need together with the structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and *reciprocity* are key concepts of service-learning" (1996, p. 5, emphasis ours). As we explored the presence of service learning in higher education through institutional websites, this last line was cited again and again. Reciprocity, in some incarnation, is almost always present in the rhetoric of service.

[3] At Syracuse University, we have an on-campus office, the Center for Public and Community Service (CPCS), which negotiates, manages,

and maintains links with community non-profit agencies. Each semester CPCS distributes an extensive list of 150 possible community placements. Students send a wish list of 3 selections and CPCS coordinates placements for them. Students are required by CPCS to work for at least 20 hours over the course of the semester at the agencies.

[4] Data for this article was collected during the service learning writing courses taught in fall 1999. All student work has been used with the permission of the writers. Student writers were consulted and elected to use their real names.

[5] In their doctoral work, Tracy and Tobi are researching and developing ethical practices of service learning curriculum, sustained community partnerships, and critical pedagogy. We look forward to additional research which will continue to enlarge the dialogue to include student learners and community collaborators.

[6] If space permitted, we would extend Britzman's discussion of self-subversive narratives of education: "to explore those other dimensions, that other story, the story of one's own otherness" (p. 16). She describes the three versions or retellings of a story as the ethnographic, the reflective, and the uncanny. We also draw attention to *Political Moments in the Classroom*, (Himley, et. al.), an account of a group of teachers in the Syracuse University Writing Program who used collaborative story-telling as a method for refracting and understanding the many aspects of challenging classroom events, or ruptura, that roughly fell under the rubric of 'the political.'

[7] See Britzman for a discussion of Bruno Bettelheim's notion of the good enough teacher, who transfers not a learning, but a demand that students learn to make their own demands in learning (p. 41).

[8] There are many structural changes too: the service learning course I designed is focused specifically on having Syracuse students tutor in the public high schools in the city. With advice from faculty in the School of Education, I have met and talked with high school teachers interested in having these tutors. The project is much more narrowed and focused in its relationship with the community, in its goals, in its tasks.

[9] I acknowledge the academic and ethical work of Margaret Dana Singsen, Kaye Berube, and the rest of my Fall 1999 WRT 105 class that I have represented in this article.

[10] This course was designed by two of this article's authors, Tobi and Tracy. It was taught during the Fall 1999 semester and was populated with students who had been enrolled in a section which required them to spend at least twenty hours outside of class working with a local non-profit agency of their choice, preferably on literacy-related projects. By the fifth week of the course, students were assigned to after-school tutoring programs like the Boys and Girls Club and public school classrooms

where they assisted teachers with music education, drama, and art. All students worked directly with children.

[11] For clarity and with her permission, we use Margaret's middle name in this story.

[12] The mini-essay prompts asked students to: analyze agency mission statements; describe physical locations; identify, categorize, and describe agency members; capture and explain some dialogue and agency-specific language.

[13] This is a story of corners, of shape-shifting and breaks, one teacher's sequence of motion, representation, and reformulation. Like all rupturas, the beginning is one of many and, while this text must stop, it does not conclude.

[14] A pseudonym

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