CSL, Multiliteracies, and Multimodalities

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This paper reflects on a research project aimed at assessing student learning in a Community Service Learning (CSL) project. A group of 50 student teachers in a Language Teaching programme in the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg were required to offer their 'language' services to community organisations, in particular, their writing skills as a form of service. Apart from the writing they did for and with the community, the students also wrote about the community as part of the Due Performance requirements of their Language Teaching programme. While offering their services, these students generated a wealth of multimodal texts and artifacts, ranging from posters, flyers, and advertisements, to educational supplements and brochures. Positioning the research in the theoretical frameworks of Service Learning theory and the Multiliteracies Project of the New London Group the aim of the project was to assess the learning these students had done as a consequence of their Community Service. I argue that this type of service augments student teachers' academic literacies by developing their social literacies about the communities they will service in their capacities as teaching professionals, becoming truly 'multiliterate' in the process. I also argue that CSL enables student teachers to understand language education in general, and writing instruction in particular in a new way. The major finding from a Critical Discourse Analysis of the verbal and visual texts and artifacts these students generated, reveals that although student language teachers are confronted with new writing genres in the communities and new ways of assessing successful writing in these contexts, they clearly saw the need for social action in communities as well as the need for social critique of community work.

Introduction

This paper reflects on a research project aimed at assessing student learning in a Community Service Learning (CSL) project. A group of 50 student teachers in a Language Teaching programme in the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg engaged in a CSL project in which they were required to offer their *language* services to community organisations, in particular, their writing skills. Apart from the writing they did *for* and *with* the community, the students also wrote *about* the community as part of the Due Performance requirements of their Language Teaching programme. While offering their services, these students generated a wealth of multimodal texts and artifacts, ranging from posters, flyers, and advertisements, to educational supplements and brochures. Positioning the research in the theoretical frameworks of the Multiliteracies Project of the New London Group and Community Service Learning theory, the aim of the project was to assess the learning these students had done as a consequence of their Community Service.

Learning through Service / Writing for the Community

The strand of the growing body of literature on CSL pursued in this article is that of Teacher Education in general and academic writing in particular. Much has been written about the role of Service Learning (SL) in teacher education programmes. SL has become an alternative tool in the suite of pedagogical approaches used in teaching, as well as a means to generate new knowledge

about learning. Some research has been done about SL in teacher education (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000; Castle & Osman, 2003; LaMaster, 2001; Petersen, 2007; Root, Callahan & Sepanski, 2002), usually about how to integrate SL in the curriculum, with the exception of Petersen who investigated the level of student engagement in SL as part of their education programme. Little, however, has been said about what students actually learn from their service in the community.

Similarly, at micro-level – the level of language teaching and writing instruction – some research has been done on the way SL has been integrated in the language curriculum (Droge & Ortega-Murphy, 1999), with, perhaps, its antecedents in Community Language Learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Richards & Rogers, 1986) emphasising the counselling aspect of a partnership between teacher and learner, and, by analogy, between student-teacher and community partner. Some research has also been done about SL in the writing curriculum (Adler, Crooks & Watters, 1997; Bacon, 2001; Benson & Christian, 2002; Deans, 2000, 2003; Wurr, 2002) but little about what students learn from offering their writing skills as service to the community. Bacon (2001) and Deans (2000, 2003), for example, juxtapose academic writing and 'real world' writing, Bacon proposing what she calls 'the social turn' in academic writing, and Deans, 'taking the next step', so to speak, with his theories about community writing.

Bacon's first social turn was the widening of the audience for student writing from teachers to peers. Deans' next step is to widen it beyond the classroom, into the community. Bacon's second social turn is viewing students and their writing as participating in a wider discourse community. Deans' next step is to widen it further to non-academic discourse communities, such as the workplace.

Bacon's third turn in academic writing is the studying of writing and literacy in other sites, such as the workplace, and Deans obviously extended that to include writing within those communities. Bacon's fourth turn is cultivating an understanding of the multicultural composition of the classroom, and Deans' next step was to work and write with multicultural groups. Lastly, Bacon argues for the democratising and consciousness raising potential of writing, and Deans naturally follows with a 'marriage' of academic writing and pragmatic social actions. Deans then synthesises these theories about community writing in three propositional relationships between academic writing and community work (2000; 2003): writing *about* the community; writing *for* the community; and writing *with* the community.

This article aims to assess the learning student teachers have done from offering their writing skills as service to the community in terms of teaching and learning in general, and in terns of language instruction and language learning in particular, with specific focus on the texts student teachers wrote as part of their service.

The diverse and varied nature of these texts necessitates another, complementary strand in the theory of academic writing: that of Multiliteracies. The texts students produced while writing about, for and with the community, range from posters, flyers, and advertisements, to educational supplements and brochures. While doing community service, students had to generate a new range of writing genres, apart from the conventional academic essay they usually are required to do for degree purposes. The Multiliteracies Project tries to capture this. The theoretical tenet advanced by the New London Group (2000:3) is related to the increasing multiplicity and integration of

significant modes of meaning making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the special, the behavioural and so on, in the wake of the expansion of language teaching to include such diverse fields of study as mass media, multimedia, and hypermedia. Secondly, the Group uses the term multiliteracies as a way to focus on the realities of increasing local diversity and global connectedness (2000:3). Both these facts, the group maintains, make dealing with difference – linguistic differences and cultural differences – central to the pragmatics of our working lives, our civic lives, and our private lives. Effective citizenship and productive work now require that we interact effectively using multiple languages, multiple 'Englishes' and communication patterns which cross cultural, community and national boundaries. As a result, the New London Group proposes an alternative pedagogy of multiliteracies (2000: 15-24) that includes treating any semiotic activity, including using language to produce (or write) or consume (or read) as a matter of using available 'designs', or genres, and redesigning, or rather, transforming these to suit new purposes in new contexts, with new demands on writers and readers alike. These theories resonate well with the notion of writing in SL. Conventional writing genres, for example, have to be transformed into new texts required by the community that have other functions than merely serving as a text submitted for formal evaluation by a university instructor.

Designing the project

The research design of this project was a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1998) of the verbal and visual data generated by the students while they were learning through offering their services to communities. These communities ranged from Acquired brain injury-centres, to Drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres, Old aged homes, Nursery schools for abandoned children with HIV/AIDS, Nature conservation projects, Hearing disability schools, Homes for homeless children, Family heath services, and so on.

Students were also very inventive with the type of writing they did for and with the community. The writing ranged from letters to donors, reminding them of fund raising activities, to grant proposals, pamphlets and posters advertising the services of a community project, learning guides for young visitors to the centres, and even short articles for magazines designed for young adults about a variety of subjects.

Over and above the writing that students had to do with and for the community, they also had to engage in academic writing activities. Firstly, they were asked to write an academic essay on the social concern or issue addressed in and by the community project. They then had to 'translate' their research into a popular audience version, for example, writing an article for a local newspaper, a family magazine, or a pamphlet. Thirdly, they had to write up an interview they had conducted with their community partner. Fourthly, they had to keep a dialogic journal, diarising their thoughts and feelings after each visit to the community, and lastly, students had to write a reflective essay on their experiences on the whole SL project. What is clear about the research design is that it provided numerous opportunities for students to construct conventional academic and unconventional 'real life' texts. They had to embrace explicitly the notion of multiliteracies in and through their writing.

Reading their writing: a critical discourse analysis of students' texts

The major findings gleaned from a critical discourse analysis of students' texts produced during SL include the notion that students developed a strong sense of social identities and a concomitant sense of what it means to be 'literate' in a society. In addition, students' texts indicate that they become multiliterate in terms of writing genres in a non-formal setting, expanding the boundaries of classroom teaching with regard to writing instruction. They also realise alterative ways of assessing successful writing apart from the conventional university lecturer evaluating their writing. Thirdly, the texts reveal that students realise the value of engaging in social action, but that they also tend to critique community work.

I wish to highlight one example of how social identity develops and what it means to become literate in a particular culture. One student worked as a free-lance, intern journalist for a youth magazine, focusing of health awareness and responsible life-style issues. During her SL experience at the magazine, she wrote an article, entitled *RESPECT* in which she focused on the inequality between the sexes among teenagers. Her tone is informal, even 'hip' as she argues that although South Africa has a Bill of Rights, the society still has to endure a high rate of rape and abuse. She argues that although the history of migrant labour has caused a rift between male and female, rape and abuse cannot be attributed to 'race' alone. She continues to plead for women to become more assertive and men to be more reflective about their male identities. The student then poses an uncomfortable question: why haven't women taken back power equal to that yielded by men, long ago? Her answer is quite interesting: women are too obsessed with their looks, wanting to conform to notions of female stereotypes, and, secondly, they have a limited understanding of sexual equality. She ends her article by addressing the 'guys', asking them how they feel about women after having read her article. Do they have a little more respect for them? She invokes Maya Angelou's words, imploring women to remember that every time a man wants to bring a woman down "You may shoot me with your words. You may cut me with your eyes. You may kill me with your hatefulness. But still, like air, I rise." The irony of this article resides in the fact that it is accompanied by a number of photographs depicting women in traditional subservient roles, such as wearing neck rings and traditionally beaded head rings. This resulted in a virtual mismatch between the verbal 'message' and the visual referents in the article. The student suggests a similar disjuncture in the reasoning about sexual equality; men unrelenting about female stereotypes and expectations, and women 'wanting it both ways': fixating on 'looks' and being respected for their intellectual abilities. What the student has suggested in her article is that social identities are complex, and often contradictory, and that in order to function in a society, members have to be aware of these complexities and contradictions; in short, they have to become literate in this society if they want to shift the balance of power between the sexes.

In terms of becoming multiliterate, I want to cite the texts produced by another student who worked with a Family Health Care centre, where her SL included designing posters, flyers, book markers and car stickers for the organisation. The topic she worked on was called MAP (Muslim AIDS Programme), The slogan she employed was "Save sex rather than 'safe' sex", listing the objectives of the MAP programme and informing the readers about workshops, training, seminars, networking and community awareness programmes, as well as voluntary counselling and testing services. The student was fully aware of the different linguistic requirements of these different

texts and the information that can be included, a car sticker, for example, being much shorter than, say, a brochure with more space to fill with information and the like. What was ironic about this seemingly very successful advertising campaign (all the designs for posters, pamphlets and car stickers were commercially produced and widely distributed in the community) is the fact that the student indicated that although she thought she was quite good at writing for the community, it was a community she did not know at all:

> *Well my initial efforts were not quite the disaster I thought it would be – in fact it proved to be quite successful - English has always been my favourite subject at school and the task of writing for the community had been an exhilarating one, which exposed me to new findings and experiences. I used to be one of those who regarded myself as above others in the sense that HIV and AIDS could never affect me or the people close to me. After all we're Muslim and we don't go around getting AIDS! Boy was I jolted to reality when I came to the realisation that this as much affects me as the next person.*

This was written in a reflective essay about her SL experiences and it signals that not only did she rate herself as a successful writing in the community, but that social identities are contested and have to be negotiated continuously. She also indicated that her experience prepared her for her teaching career, because she would be prepared when "these problems walk through my classroom door, having realised the bias involved over and above the physical illness that goes with HIV/AIDS".

I already alluded to the notion of 'successful writing' as one of the issues that students learn while they provide service to the community (commercially produced posters and flyers, in the case of the Muslim AIDS Programme). In addition, I want to discuss an experience of another student who wrote explicitly about what successful writing in SL entails. This student was placed at a school for pupils with barriers to learning. The student was required to assist with the writing of letters to potential donors. She included in this letter the nature of the fundraising event, a Golf Day, as well as information about the mission of the school: "providing affordable yet quality education to children whose learning has been interrupted due to educational neglect, learning disabilities and/or inadequate education". She also spelled out the aim of the day, to raise funds and to elicit advertising. What is of particular importance of this text is an inter-textual link to a comment in her reflective essay at the end of her SL experience when she states that:

> *Successful writing outside the university is markedly different from the type of academic writing that we had to do for the community. Although, I imagine, the writing process is essentially the same, you have to convince people of the merit of a social course, not regurgitating facts for your lecturer. That is easy – I am very good at summarising different views from different sources, but the community writing was much more than that. A distinction would have been a cheque in the post as a direct response to the grant proposal and the letter to donors I have written for this organisation.*

Looking at critical thinking as one of the issues students gained from their SL experience, an important theme to emerge from the data is that of systemic injustice in society. One student, working with an environmental agency that does much consciousness raising through educational work (the student had to write an educational supplement for the organisation), he pointed out that it was ironic that the oil company that sponsors the agency trying to save important swamp

land, was in fact responsible for much of the pollution that threatened the swamp land in the first place. "They are damaging the swamp while trying to save it at the same time", he wrote. The irony resides in the text this student produced as his version of an educational supplement: a fairy tale, with drawings, about displaced otters that have to relocate to safer ground after imminent threats to their lives:

> *The entire swamp was flooded and one could see the inhabitants of the swamp hanging from or sitting in the mangrove trees. Calling back and forth to find family and friends, the destruction of the swamp was at first forgotten. This was not their first flood and they hoped that in time all that was lost would once again be recovered with hard work.*

It is a pity this student did not use his awareness of social injustice to mobilise the otters to take up arms against bigger, more powerful forces that are causing their hardship. In this instance the student realises the need for social action, for doing something about the threats to the environment, but he does not integrate this awareness into social critique. Rather, the critique is done in his reflective journal.

One factor that has to be borne in mind when explaining the data is the fact that student teachers are really only emerging writers in 'the real world' and one cannot expect of them to master the intricacies of all the different genres they were expected to write with and for the community they served.

Secondly, although writing is a partnership, a reciprocal relationship, often the community task masters have an intuitive feeling for successful writing in the context of a community project, and one cannot expect them to make these intuitive feelings about writing explicit to the students.

Another factor is the importance of constant writing instruction on campus, when students are not engaged in community partnership writing. It is important that students receive instruction in generating ideas, in crafting arguments, and in editing written work.

Fourthly, the issue of assessment has to be negotiated upfront. Success in academic writing at university does not automatically lead to successful writing for and with community partners. There should be at least a creative tension between academic writing and community writing.

In conclusion, for success in writing partnerships between students and community members, it is important that student realise that to provide service only, is insufficient in terms of social change. Students are simply perpetuating the unequal balance of power: they are privileged graduates from a university with all the expertise, 'helping out' the 'needy'. It is important that students realise the need for empowerment, the need for social justice, and if they have been instrumental in enabling community partners to do writing for themselves, it has been a major victory for social justice. Triangulating the data, analysing visual texts in different modalities such as posters, articles, and educational supplements, with written, verbal data in reflective, post-Service Learning experience essays, reveals the contradictions and the contestation in becoming truly socially literate in the community, in developing social identities and in critiquing social injustice. This type of service augments student teachers' academic literacy by developing their social literacy about the communities they will service in their capacity as teaching professionals.

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