

**T**he carillon from St. Vincent's peals the evening melodies. Birds of many species sing their varied songs above in the exotic old trees as I walk toward the classroom building for my elementary education methodology class. Pulling my cart of books, handouts, videotapes, and assorted teaching materials, I wonder what I have forgotten. I take a few breaths to draw in the peacefulness, and nod to students clustered for a quick before-class meal at outside tables. The low drone of freeway traffic is almost lost to consciousness. This is the Doheny campus of Mount St. Mary's College, located in the heart of Los Angeles, two blocks from the busiest LA freeways, clogged bumper to bumper. A second campus perches in the hills across town. The two campuses function as one college with associate of arts and graduate programs at the Doheny campus, and bachelors degrees at the Chalon campus.

The Doheny campus is a pond of tranquility within the complex, pulsing energy of central Los Angeles. Its history is entwined in the rise of millionaires. A square block of Victorian homes surrounded by plantings collected from around the world, the campus was home to the Dohenys, their relatives and friends. Today it serves the college mission: preparing multiethnic, multilingual students to become leaders in a diverse and changing world. The opulent mansion of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Doheny now houses special events on the first floor, administrative offices on the second floor, and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet on the third floor. Graced by the leaded glass windows and heavy oak doors of another era, the rest of the homes and out-buildings also have students or Sisters living upstairs and college programs downstairs. The Education Department, a state certified Child Care Center, the Center for Urban Partnership, student offices of Latinas Unidas and the African-American Council of Women have reshaped elegant living space to address present and future

needs. The splendor of past, isolated wealth has been adapted for 21<sup>st</sup> century work to empower those who have historically been ignored.

A quiet, persistent commitment to social justice permeates college activities. Predominately European American in the 1960s, the student body now reflects the ethnic diversity of California and Los Angeles more closely than any other independent college in the state. The current mission states that Mount St. Mary's College will exemplify an inclusive, progressive Catholic tradition; the strategic plan includes service and social justice components. To this end, for instance, the college has supported the development of the Center for Cultural Fluency where teachers can borrow books, posters and a variety of resources representing the major ethnic groups of Los Angeles—resources hard to find elsewhere.

As I continue toward class I mull over my students' incredibly diverse stories and experiences and worry whether I will succeed in helping them comprehend how their own students' lives and communities can become essential components of curriculum. The class's diversity is exhilarating for me, but also daunting. Despite outside political forces that negate the celebration of multi-ethnic and multilingual ways of knowing and viewing the world, Mount St. Mary's College is a place where staff, faculty and students work for an environment that values diverse perspectives and experiences. One group of students in my class describes themselves as "two Catholics, two Protestants, one Hindu." They continued:

We speak English, Spanish, Hindi, Tagalog and Vietnamese. Two of us are graduate students, three are undergraduates. One has taught for 10 years, one for two years, one has been a teacher's aide, and two of us have never taught.

But so much diversity can also be daunting. I know how difficult it is to celebrate and recognize multiple ways of knowing day to day, one to one. It is a goal that keeps faculty humble.

Entering the classroom a half hour early, I wonder how much the beginning credential candidates found helpful in last week's service learning presentation by Gloria Ramos, a recent graduate whose third grade class is immersed in service learning. Did these new preservice and in-service teachers believe that service learning projects are possible? Or did it seem too complicated, too over-

powering? I wonder if they will be able to see themselves as capable of using service learning.

Months later, as I sit down to write about the experience, I recognize that Gloria's project gives structure to this story, as it did for my students' efforts to understand and teach service learning. Two themes run through our story, and Gloria's experiences are integral to both.

Our service learning story began a year and a half ago when I found four energetic and thoughtful colleagues, including Gloria, willing to join a team to plan and implement a service learning grant. Our goal was to infuse service learning throughout the elementary credential program in order to help credential candidates connect explicitly with the parents and neighborhoods of their schools. In an era of parent-blaming, we wanted them to learn the strength and value of respecting and involving parents and of taking advantage of the many resources that exist in urban communities. The two dominant themes that thread through our first year and a half are the important role a cohesive planning and implementation team played as we grappled with unknowns, and the need to remain flexible.

The *cohesiveness of our planning and implementation team*—four education department faculty members associated in various ways with the elementary education program and an alumna teaching in Los Angeles who is familiar with service learning—sustained our vision through the ups and downs of our individual projects and our over-extended lives. Team meetings gave us the time to think deeply about what we were doing, laugh at some of our outrageous errors, and push ourselves along a mutual though varied pathway.

The other theme is that *flexibility is essential*. Without flexibility we would have missed unexpected opportunities and been unable to rescue ourselves from potential failures. Predictability was scarce during our year of beginnings, and we had to adapt to students' schedules, to plans that did not work, to unexpected opportunities, to changes in "definite" plans. In turn, the credential candidates had to struggle with new expectations and learning venues they often found strange and sometimes aggravating.

The elementary education credential candidates were introduced to service learning with a brief video and discussion that drew on their prior knowledge. Gloria Ramos' presentation followed. Gloria is a bilingual teacher in an area

plagued by poverty and gangs. During her presentation she described her third grade students' service learning project, Family Literacy Night, and the events that led up to it. She showed a video of the many activities at Family Literacy Night: an anti-gang play written and performed by her students, grade-level writing awards selected by her students, and workshops where students and parents learned to construct literacy together. For weeks the students and many parents had planned the evening. The students' pride grew throughout the process as they saw that they could help influence their parents, many of whom had little formal education. However, preceding the decision to hold a school-wide literacy night, Gloria had spent months learning about community needs and defining topics that were possible for third grade children to tackle. She was honest about how much she had to learn after she introduced service learning to the children:

I came into the classroom...thinking, "Well...there's a lot of graffiti around and maybe we could do a graffiti clean-up project or, you know, plant more trees." [But the students shifted the conversation.] They said, "There's a lot of trash because people don't care, because gangsters come and they start ripping everything up." All of a sudden it started getting into this conversation about...weekends, and shootouts, how their uncle did drugs....At first...I was pounding my head, where is this going to go?... [T]hey asked me what should we do, and I just kept going back to them: "I don't know. What do *you* think we should do?"

Her response had been key. The students realized they really could talk about these topics and brainstorm solutions. Gloria learned to guide the conversations toward personally powerful, but realistic possibilities. They discussed the fact that they could not reform every gang member, but they could talk with an uncle about doing drugs or their mother about drinking.

So we started talking about how we can possibly have an arena where we can talk to the parents and the kids can voice their opinions. Where they can say, "We want to do something about this. Can you come in and help as parents?...We're not quite sure what we want to do or how we're going to tackle this, but we're thinking that maybe if you look at why gangsters become gangsters and we talk about it, parents and kids, we can come up with some ideas." So that's what we did.

They then worked with the principal to put on a Family Literacy Night.

Gloria provided students with books about experiences similar to their own. They read *Kids with Courage*<sup>1</sup> and compared their own acts of courage and possibilities to those of children in the book. They began to realize that they could in fact do things like some of the children in the book. They read *The Wednesday Surprise*<sup>2</sup> and wrote to the author, Eve Bunting. Gloria recounted:

The book's about a little girl who helps her grandmother learn to read. Because a lot of their parents aren't literate in Spanish or English...the kids were really excited.... The book totally validated their experience...so they wrote...and told her about how special they thought the book was and how they identified with the experience and how they too wanted to help their mom and dad read.

As their confidence grew so did their enthusiasm, and they threw themselves into preparing for the Family Literacy Night, involving parents, writing song lyrics and a play to express their concerns, translating material, judging the best author from each grade level. The evening event finally came, and the auditorium was packed despite a torrential downpour. The children all had a part, and last week Gloria recounted for the credential candidates how their pride and involvement grew during the months and peaked during Family Literacy Night. The after-glow was still with her as she talked to the credential candidates:

The kids were so empowered.... They were just like, "Wow, we can go and transform the world!" [During Family Literacy Night] they were the ones that ran the show. They were the emcees, they were the ones that told the teachers where they were going to hold their workshops, they led the parents to the workshops.... At the end they were the ones who thanked all the parents and the community agencies for coming. They wrote them thank you letters....

In their journals...they wrote up the part of the evening they took part in...what was going on...how they felt. And reading these journals was really powerful because they were talking about how proud they were of their classmates and how proud they are of who they are. Some of these kids were still not reading at grade level... but all of a sudden they're feeling really proud of what they have been able to accomplish and of course that boosts their academic performance overall because [school success] has a lot to do with your motivation and how you feel about yourself.... When you tap

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, B. (1992). *Kids with courage: True stories about young people making a difference*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Bunting, E. (1989). *The Wednesday surprise*. New York: Scholastic Books.

into something that means something to them or that they have knowledge about, it is amazing how you can see them improve.

I knew Gloria's experience with service learning would leave an impression with the beginning credential candidates. It was valuable that she was "one of their own"—a recent Mount graduate, bilingual, a child of immigrant parents. My task was to understand what they were able to grasp from Gloria's presentation and build on it.

## **Weaving a Team Tapestry**

Our planning and implementation team sought to include service learning in the elementary credential program for one clear purpose—to locate community knowledge within classroom curriculum. Although the team members wore many hats, in relation to this project we included the clinical coordinator for fieldwork; the instructor for math, science and computer courses; an instructor of the Psychological Development and Learning, and Cultural Diversity courses; the director of elementary education and professor of several program courses; and a bilingual third grade teacher who graduated from the program four years ago. We had all taught and worked in urban schools in various capacities. We met every month or two throughout one planning semester and an implementation year.

At the end of that year we gathered to debrief and to indulge in some hindsight thinking. Sitting on the patio of an old Los Angeles hotel, we poured the remaining wine and leaned a little closer as Jackie Herst began to speak. She had included a service learning project in the math and science methodology course both fall and spring semesters. The first semester had been plagued with inappropriate service learning arrangements and scheduling difficulties. The second semester tutoring assignments, though still meeting with some resistance, were improved, but she was still frustrated by the outcome. She commented:

What's the quote? "If you want to succeed, double your failure rate!" The first semester was a scheduling nightmare. By the second semester I was able to recognize what wasn't working, and so there was a lot of learning for *me*.

Again I wish I had started earlier in the course.... I discovered from the students' reflections that...even though they can demonstrate understanding in the classroom, what they did to alter their teaching practices when they were working with a child was to revert back to their prior knowledge.... The way they had been taught dominated what they did.... So the benefit that came of this initial year was *my* realizing how hard it was for them to transfer their learning and *apply* their knowledge.... So I learned how to change this....

Next year I'll have them begin tutoring a child at the very beginning of the course.... You know, I'll say, "Here are your textbooks and here is your child to tutor," and we'll begin!

We all laughed and continued our reflections until time forced us to leave. Even so, our discussions continued down the hallway and out into the parking lot. Our coming together provided us with energy and reassurance. Energy and cohesiveness: these summed up the team. Usually exhausted when we met, our collective energy created what we needed for forward movement. In the planning stage, beginning meetings were quietly thoughtful as we enjoyed the luxury of taking an hour or two from over-crushed days to envision service learning in our courses. The first meeting notes read:

What is service learning?

- It's not patronizing; not a 'holier than thou' experience.
- It's not observation/participation assignments nor student teaching where credential candidates need to learn directly from master teachers.
- It is connecting learning to the real world and connecting those real experiences to theories being learned in the course.
- It's an attempt to change the teaching/learning process, to introduce a more reflective process into teaching, in which the teacher is much more the learner than historically.
- It's a move toward potential, or real, social action.

As we connected abstract notions to our lived experiences at a meeting two weeks later, we added to our notes:

Service learning is a real connection between the kids and their communities. Gloria's kids in a middle-class community<sup>3</sup> seem disconnected, as though they are looking through a window. They see every social ill as foreign and something you read about in a

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<sup>3</sup> Gloria Ramos taught in a middle-class school during the planning semester. She moved to Gonzalez Elementary School in a working class, Latino neighborhood as we began the implementation year.

book. Service learning should provide them a reconnection to reality....

In contrast, the urban, poverty-plagued kids Jackie taught last year often had a very large disconnect between their world at home and their classroom. Empowering them to make a difference in their community could engage them in the learning process. In Jackie's situation, service learning therefore becomes student empowerment and a way to connect these children's lives to their community....

The issue of realizing the total realities of your community is very important, of not being blind; it's essential to build citizens and people who are able to make informed decisions....

Service learning needs to be ongoing; not just one or two isolated activities or a field trip.

The community runs through all this. It means blurring the lines between the schools and the communities.

In just two meetings, we had moved from quiet thoughtfulness to an energy grounded in the realization that we were working toward a fundamental pedagogical change, toward a service learning pedagogy.

As we gained momentum, our meeting notes became splattered with concerns and questions about how to weave service learning into crammed, mandated credential courses.

- Can we use observation/participation settings as mentoring *and* service learning experiences?
- Will service learning help credential candidates recognize that children come to school or begin work on any project with their own schemas and frameworks....
- How do you keep credential candidates focused on community issues—not rainforests in far away countries?...
- How do we keep them from using students as guinea pigs?...
- What can service learning give us? Why are we looking at it? Will our credential candidates know how to use it effectively within the curriculum with their own students...if they haven't experienced it themselves?

After we began implementation of our plans, meetings became more raucous as we shared our successes and failures. We laughed often at our experiences and our mistakes. We pushed and tugged at each others' ideas and plans. Gloria and her third graders set the pace as we were drawn in by their increasing involvement and growth and by what Gloria was learning and accomplishing. Having those third graders in the midst of their own service



learning projects became an essential thread in our own learning. We had, from the beginning, planned to have Gloria, and possibly other teachers, help our credential candidates envision service learning in the classroom. What we had not imagined was the strength of learning that came from having an evolving example of service learning in the midst of our team discussions.

Our developing projects and experiences began to interweave in unexpected ways. Fran Powell, our clinical coordinator, helped write a service learning grant in a teacher center school where my class was placed for observation/participation assignments. Gloria shared her unfolding experiences in her third grade class with both my beginning methodology course and Deb Giunta's child and adolescent learning and development class. Deb decided her course could help with Gloria's Family Literacy Night and learn a great deal about children's learning. Our projects began building on each other.

Common threads emerged as our different experiences wove together into an energetic whole. We all introduced the concept of service learning to our classes with feelings of trepidation. We had included the projects as an integral part of the credential courses, but prior experience prepared us for resistance from the students to "yet another assignment." Their reactions, unexpectedly, were enthusiastic. In the abstract, service learning as a pedagogy made a lot of sense to our students who are socially committed and often come from urban neighborhoods where they plan to teach.

I expressed my amazement at one meeting:

They were really struck by it and the first thing that happened was they began talking about their school and church experiences with service. There were enough Catholic school teachers and students who had done socially focused activities in their parish to get a discussion going. Although what they were talking about was service, not service learning, they obviously understood the possibilities.... You could see how they could very easily develop them into full service learning projects. So, I was amazed at the instant enthusiasm I got.

But when we introduced actual service learning projects into credential courses, students' attitudes changed. Concrete service learning requirements generated negative responses throughout our courses, even while positive

responses were also trickling in. One student in Deb's adolescent and child development and learning course who had not been enthusiastic, reflected later:

My attitude at the beginning of my service learning assignment was not too positive. I viewed this as another "vacuum" sucking up more of whatever little extra time I had to spare. Moreover, I thought that as a teacher with over ten years' experience, there would be little I would gain from service learning....

Another student reflected, "After working with the girl I would be tutoring the first day, all the negativity I had toward the assignment seemed to be justified." These two students moved past their initial responses and learned a considerable amount, but Deb had to withstand the tenor of frustration in her class. Knowing there was a team of supporters seemed to help us weather some of this negativity.

Although meetings were sometimes months apart, we kept in touch, even if haphazardly. Fran would catch us in the hallway for a minute of enthusiastic reporting about five teachers who would be sharing their service learning experiences with students in her secondary curriculum course and of her anxiety about whether this would help or overwhelm her students as they developed curriculum units. Jackie, as she passed through the old pantry that holds our mailboxes, communicated her quiet distress at the nightmarish arrangements made for the students in her math and science methodology course which included virtually no math or science. Gloria, who teaches a half hour from campus, photocopied and delivered her third graders' papers that reflected their new understanding and valuing of community knowledge. I sent Gloria an article which she passed on to Deb, who incorporated it in her course.

Our service learning team thrived on the energy we derived from in-depth collaboration, from learning by trying, from our success and failures, and from our growing insights. These were the warp and woof that held us together during the shifts and slow movement, these and the belief that we were headed toward a potentially powerful goal. Throughout the first year of struggling, two quotes on my office wall became guides for us—one from Nadinne Cruz, director of the Haas Center at Stanford, the other from a rebellious Tasmanian student:

What do service learning programs need from their communities?

We seek communities  
who are organized  
to build their own capacity to live,  
and through their experiences  
have accumulated knowledge and wisdom  
that can be shared  
to benefit everyone,  
and who are willing to engage  
in friendship, partnership, or allyship  
so that we might all LEARN and live more fully in the world.  
*-Nadinne Cruz*

If you are here to help me, then you are wasting your time.  
If you came because your liberation is bound up with mine,  
then let us begin.

*-Lily Walker, student*

They framed our dilemmas—and our goals—well.

## **Flexibility is Essential**

Jackie: I'm going to try again, start earlier...give them more voice.

Gloria: Where are their ideas going to take me?

Fran: I just have to wait for the teachable moment.

If we had not been flexible and willing to change plans and ideas at many points, our experience would have been hopeless. Sometimes we were willing participants in the change, jumping at a small, unexpected opportunity. At other times we were ready to tear our hair out at the frustration and inconvenience. If we had not adapted, we would have hit irreconcilable resistance from some credential candidates. We often found ourselves thinking on our feet. Not an unusual need for educators, but we stretched well past our comfort zones.

A pervasive and frustrating situation was the collision of preplanned tutoring projects, the credential candidates' hopelessly tight schedules, and their beliefs that other arrangements would provide more instruction and be more convenient. Deb, teaching the child and adolescent development and learning course, and Jackie, teaching the math and science methodology course, found themselves in highly complex, shifting situations. Both wanted their credential candidates to tutor individual students. Neither of their plans worked out as expected, and they each spent considerable energy trying to rework arrange-

ments, adapt to students' needs, and adjust course assignments to fit new situations. It was a bit like trying to repair a car as it cruises down the freeway.

Deb hoped the credential candidates would work with an adolescent to improve or complete school work and reflect on what they were learning from the students. Toward the end of their tutoring they would then take their tutees to the Youth Summit for Peace at Mount St. Mary's College, a conference for LA area high school students. But many pieces of these plans did not work, for multiple reasons, and only one of her credential candidates took a student to the conference. Deb had also structured weekly tutoring sessions into the course so her students could reflect over an extended period of time and gradually incorporate theories from course readings.

I had hoped that by teaching 251, *Child and Adolescent Learning and Development across Cultures*, with a service learning component, the students would have access to a broader range of knowledge, more knowledge diversity than we had had in the past. And that they would go into it with a frame of mind that we were going to be learning from others...even as we might be doing some service.... There was a course expectation that there would be 10 hours of service along with 10 weekly reflections....

Several students, however, "had very good reasons" why they could not commit to this weekly schedule, while others wanted to change the assignment in other ways.

Deb ended up having to readjust assignments, locations and requirements to meet compelling demands and, in some instances, resistance. Several students ended up doing a one-day volunteer task that fulfilled the required service learning hours but gave them neither a developmental perspective nor any depth of learning. Their feedback tended to be negative. They "didn't feel needed or useful." They saw students' problems as "too big to be able to make a difference." As Deb observed, they did not allow themselves "enough time for the ah-hahs." On the other hand, a few high school teachers had asked to work with elementary students, and that proved successful. One veteran teacher of 12 years wrote:

I have had no experience teaching elementary school aged children. Wow, what an eye opener this has been for me. Unlike most high school students, these kids exhibited a child-like enthusiasm and curiosity that I have not encountered since my nephews and nieces were little.... By helping these students, I was rewarded in intangible

ways such as feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction. And, in the end, I think I learned more from the students than they learned from me.

In the first case, Deb's flexibility kept the students engaged at a minimal level with service learning, yet at least engaged. In the other, it led to insights and growing confidence.

Also, Deb jumped at the opportunity to work with the Family Literacy Night.

Another piece that we ended up having, was we became...involved in the service learning project...with Gloria Ramos' class at Gonzalez Elementary. All the ED251 students went. First Gloria came to the class and presented to the class her vision of how she had come to do the project in the way that she was doing it, and then we got to see the project and see the effects of the project on the students, on their parents, on the rest of the faculty and on the community members that were there for that night. The final piece for the class then ended up being when we wrote a response to an article that we read by Vigil<sup>4</sup>...about how kids get socialized into gangs and how we can interrupt that cycle...

A very important point in the Vigil article was how schools stress parents and how schools make it difficult for parents to become involved and how afraid and scared and unfamiliar with school territory, many parents are.... From the excitement that my students had seen in the parents, they could see that that barrier had been broken, and they really had to go back and rethink any arguments that they were going to use in the future about parents not caring about their kids.... One of the things my students did was interview parents at the family night, and they heard the parents saying, "I've never been to a program that was so meaningful for me."

Jackie, in the math and science methodology course, had planned to have her students begin tutoring elementary students part-way through the semester, after they had learned enough pedagogy to apply it. The purpose was to provide credential candidates with opportunities to understand how a child was learning and thinking about math or science in a classroom setting. Because she was also a fellow in the all-college service learning program, she decided to use a school that had been prearranged by that infrastructure. However, as the semester moved on, problems beyond the elementary schools' control increased.

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<sup>4</sup> Vigil, J. D. (1999). Streets and schools: How educators can help Chicano marginalized gang youth. *Harvard Educational Review*, 69, 270-288.

