

ENGL 121B: Composition Social Issues (Writing as Social Action)

Winter 2017 • University of Washington

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Overview

This course uses service as a means of imbedding students in a concrete context for critical reading, writing, and thinking. Particularly, students will examine the questions and problems facing marginalized communities (LGBTQ, homeless, at-risk youth, ethnic minorities, women's groups, etc.) in the Seattle area, using writing as a tool for reflection and intervention. Since composition is a form of social action, we will explore how students' service learning and coursework can be translated into meaningful public acts that can inform and encourage the public to respond to the needs and concerns of marginalized communities. In doing so, students will experience writing not as a static, isolated, individual act, but rather as a dynamic, social, communal process grounded in the specificities and complexities of the writing situation.

Role of Service-Learning in the Course

Service learning is at the heart of this course. Students' community partners will provide the basis for inquiry, exploration, and composition. Students will use their placement as a way to form interpersonal connections to various publics within the larger Seattle community, creating real stakes for their writing. Writing becomes a vehicle for working through the questions, problems, and resistance faced by marginalized communities. In doing so, students will confront the real, tangible struggles and rewards of using writing to intervene in the world, and, in essence, become accountable for the publics along side which they are working.

Assignments Related to Service-Learning

Students will complete two assignment sequences grounded in their service learning placement. The first sequence focuses on using short assignments to learn and write about the organization itself and explore (more generally) the problems and concerns surrounding the marginalized community with which the organization works. These assignments culminate in a larger paper where students will be asked to produce a focused argument about a key issue in their service area where they propose causes of or solutions to this issue. In the second sequence, students will turn their attention towards producing work for their specific organization in order to explore how writing they produce can be a form of social action. Students will explore public genres of writing, using the real needs of the organization to produce works that could theoretically be used by the organization, such as pamphlets, advertisements, or fundraising letters. If the opportunity arises, I would welcome the possibility of students actually (as opposed to theoretically) composing public documents for their service organization or participating in actions/events sponsored by their organization outside of their regularly scheduled hours. Regardless of assignment, students' writing will adhere to UW's policies on public writing in that they will not publish (online or in print) anything using the organization's name without written permission from the organization.

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