Taking Language Arts to the Community

When a teacher involves students in community projects as a way to sharpen their skills, they have fun, develop compassion, and become active users of language.

It was year-plan time again at the high school where I taught English. Flipping through my notes, one concept caught my eye: "Use the students as a resource." I probed the idea more closely. Most of my students had developed English skills which they usually exhibited for an audience of one—me. Could community contacts enlarge their audience, strengthen their communication skills, and make their literature more relevant? Would the expenditure of time really benefit their learning? That fall I was ready with my plan. I named my program "English Outreach"; the theme I chose for it was "The Outsider in Society." I located literature, conceived assignments, and drew up lists of community sites and speakers. When I asked my students how many would like to leave school every Wednesday, the expected answer was instantaneous.

I sought administrative approval for the eight-week project while the students created a list of community venues, people to contact, and student preferences for placements. Together we discussed student and teacher role requirements and expectations for student conduct.

Our initial contacts with community personnel sparked quick results. The town librarian advertised our "Story Time" for preschoolers. Therapists from the seniors' home and hospital prepared the students for work at their sites. Special education, day care, and elementary school personnel invited our youthful services and stated their anticipations.

Experiences of Growth
As the project gained momentum, my students made connections between our "Outsider in Society" theme and their broadening community life experiences.

I found new ways to make my teaching vital and relevant, renewing my faith in the inherent natural goodness of my students in the process.

A student chose to present Paul Zindel's (1968) The Pigman—a poignant portrayal of teenagers struggling for connections in an uncaring world—to reluctant special education readers. He developed hand-drawn cartoons and single-line captions in his effort to let others discover his beloved Pigman.

At the hospital, one budding poet discovered that the patient assigned to her, a woman who suffered from Alzheimer's disease, enjoyed poetry. The student made large-print copies of "The Lady of Shalott" and others of her companion's favorite poems. Soon the pair were heard weaving their voices into Tennyson's tapestry of words.

After months of silence, words: a student used his knowledge of tools and wood to try to reach a patient in the therapy room who hadn't spoken for months. Suddenly, he found the man chatting with him as they planned and constructed a birdhouse together.

When the "English 20" puppeteers put on a performance for the excited children huddled in the readers' corner at the preschool, they found expectant little eyes riveted to the action on their set. Afterwards, Outreach leaders encouraged them to create their own "castle" stories.
Benefits to Both School and Community

Interactions with their community taught my students that they must polish and practice their English skills. They learned that active listening, appropriate vocal pace, and clear articulation had to be employed when conversing with the elderly. Their oral interpretation skills and creativity improved when they patiently conducted readings and created characters, costumes, and sound effects for storytimes with preschoolers.

Students gained increased confidence in their public speaking through participation in a public forum about improved housing for senior citizens. Public speaking skills were also employed when they acted as hosts, described their community service, and introduced their community contacts at Outreach culmination day.

The students enriched their appreciation and understanding of literature as they compared the fiction they had read with their expanding knowledge of age-related differences and social realities. They developed empathy. Several students continued to serve the community independently of the school. One invited a busload of friends from the senior citizens' lodge to his farm at spring calving. Two girls hosted social events at the lodge, and three boys organized bingo games and cribbage tournaments.

Students who acted as editors for elementary children, as biographers for senior citizens, and as expressers of their own feelings, experiences, and observations found that their writing and critical thinking skills grew stronger and sharper. They grew from passive users to active manipulators of language who were motivated to think and talk about English.

The community gained an appreciation of the enthusiasm, skill, and caring of their youth. Our school gained positive public relations and increased support from the childless electorate. And I found new ways to make my teaching vital and relevant, renewing my faith in the inherent natural goodness of my students in the process.

Reference


Douglas James Smith is an Assistant Professor at the University of Saskatchewan, College of Education, Department of Curriculum Studies, Room 3025, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, CN S7N OWO. Formerly, he was a high school English and drama teacher.