

Creating American Literature: Incorporating Service Learning into the  
American Literature Classroom

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When teaching an American Literature course, the question – How can I make this more engaging/exciting for students? - usually arises. Contemporary study shows that applied practice produces a major impact on student learning, and the use of service learning in the classroom allows for this applied experience in an otherwise abstract field. Though service learning is currently being used widely in many fields, including English composition courses, literature courses seem slow to make use of it.

It is easy to see why service learning projects are conducive to composition courses; research, interviews, and surveys for persuasive or informational writing often serve as much needed community service projects. The inclusion of service learning in literature courses can create a challenge for the instructor, yet this is not to say that the creative use of service learning in literature courses cannot greatly enhance the students' learning of literature. American literature courses in particular can benefit from the addition of service learning in the classroom.

This paper will offer general suggestions for including service learning projects in the American literature classroom, but it will also focus on one service learning project in particular that involves creating children's books from stories of elderly residents of a local nursing home. Each student interviews a resident about his/her past to get stories that would make good a children's book. After conducting their interviews, the students create a cohesive story from the narrative they received. Then the students visit an elementary school class where each student is placed with his/her own elementary student, so that the young student can

hear the story and illustrate the book. Every member involved then receives a copy of the finalized book. This project is beneficial because the students of an American Literature course can capture stories that may have otherwise remain untold, while creating their own piece of American literature that spans generations.

#### Objective of Service Learning Projects in American Literature

Students will learn the importance of literature to the preservation of history, as much of American literature endures because of its historical significance, and few other art forms preserve a true human account of what it meant to live in another era. Service learning projects can help the significance of historical stories in an applied way. Also service learning in American literature courses can teach the importance of acceptance towards those of other cultures, subcultures, races, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. It can also be an applied tool to help students understand the many movements important to American literature, such as literature from the oral tradition, folklore, local color stories, and Romanticism and Transcendentalism, Realism, and Modernism and Existentialism.

Service learning will allow students to see that American literature surrounds their everyday life; it is composed of an "ever-expanding variety of voices" even within their own community. This specific, generational project preserves stories of local color that may have gone unheard, thus allowing the students to create American literature.

#### Definition of Service Learning

First, it is important to define service learning; "Fundamentally, service learning can be defined as 'a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development (Qtd. In Hutchinson 429).

Service learning is different from mere volunteerism; it "distinguishes itself from volunteerism by its emphasis on reflection as well as action, combines community work with classroom instruction" (Schultz & Gere 129). When done well, it "seeks to connect community service experiences with tangible learning outcomes" (Rhoads 279).

#### Rationale for Service Learning Projects in Literature

Service learning opportunities in the classroom can also increase a student's sense of social responsibility. It allows students to not only conceive of "other" viewpoints, but it also allows them to interact with others in a concrete format, which needs to be one of the major goals of college learning, yet "Several recent studies have documented a trend toward self-interest and away from attitudes and values reflecting social responsibility. These studies have found recent declines in students' altruism, increasing concern for gaining credentials, great commitment to prospering financially, and a general lack of interest and engagement in politics" (Qtd. in Antonio, Astin, & Cress 373).

Paulo Freire stresses "problem posing" education as opposed to a "banking" method of education, where a teacher expounds facts and thus might be discrediting the values and opinions of his/her students, so that the classroom becomes a place of memorization and a battle to please the teacher, instead of a place for growth. In order to truly make a student think outside of him or herself, one must constantly strive to expose students to viewpoints of the "other" that they may not have ever considered before. It is extremely important for the contemporary student to be exposed to a great many contrasting opinions in order to be a well-rounded, productive individual, but also to better understand the components of him or herself. Service learning allows, by its very nature, the elimination of the "banking" method of education. It encourages students to discover classroom learning goals for themselves in a tangible

format with a real-world interaction where their assignment or project will be used for a definite purpose.

Several studies show the positive effects of service learning; "student participation in service learning...is positively associated with persistence in college, interest in graduate study, the development of leadership skills, and commitment to racial understanding. Additional studies across academic disciplines have found that integrated community service leads to higher grades..., greater knowledge of subject matter..., greater ability to apply course concepts to new situations..., and strengthened critical thinking skills. Moreover, students report that service experience reinforces the course material and allows them to apply principles and concepts to actual situations that they encounter in the community (Qtd. in Antonio, Astin, & Cress 373-4).

Also, the real world applications found through service learning projects helps students to remember classroom curriculum better because of service learning's tangible results; "service learning, integrated appropriately into the curriculum, could be transformative for students—that is, the kind of learning that would take place in the course would have a lasting impact because students would be immersed in a real-world community, not just involved in a simulated environment" (Hutchinson 430). The real-world nature of service learning projects allows students to encounter diversity directly.

Acceptance and understanding of diversity is another positive benefit of service learning; "Service-learning produces a number of positive effects on college students...includ[ing] a...reduction of stereotypes and better cultural understanding; and development of interpersonal skills, citizenship, social responsibility, critical thinking, and connectedness to college and career" (Worrell-Carlisle 198). Undoubtedly, "service-learning can be a tool for bringing the class to a much more human level than would otherwise be possible in a lecture-orientated class" (Qtd in Worrell-Carlisle 198). The benefits of service

learning are hard to ignore, though it should be said that service learning projects are often somewhat of a challenge.

Service learning projects can be time-consuming; it takes effort on the part of the instructor to organize the particulars of any given project; "A concern commonly expressed by faculty is that requiring community service as a part of a class demands considerably more time and effort than more traditional courses" (Antonio, Astin, & Cress 389). Many times colleges have a service learning coordinator to find willing participants and possible project opportunities, but still it takes effort from the instructor to tie these projects into his/her course curriculum. If the college does not have a service learning coordinator, then the instructor's effort has undoubtedly increased because he/she will have to contact members of the community to inquire on their willingness to participate. Also, just taking part in the logistics of a service learning project can be difficult. An instructor must be committed to devoting class time to education on the components and benefits on service learning, possible field trips, and/or class time for group members to work on their project. Arguably though, even with these possible inconveniences, the benefits of service learning make the process worthwhile.

#### Components of Service Learning

It is also important to understand the components of most service learning projects, so that a project will be effective. Hutchinson states that the components of a service learning project are "Meaningful service to others...Clear curriculum connections... [and] Reflection and Evaluation (431-3). A service learning project must be meaningful not only for the students involved, but also for the community member(s) that it is supposed to help. First it must be clear exactly what the community member(s) would like to receive out of this project; "Mutuality is the understanding that in a service-learning project, it is important to encourage a two-way service ethic. That is, those being served should

benefit at least as much, if not more, than those performing the actual 'service'" (Sheffield 48). Again, "there must exist a dialogue between server and served....Diversity requires that needs of both server and served are met" (Sheffield 50). The instructor should spend some time meeting with the community organization to determine what their expectations would be, but it is also equally important for the organization to understand the instructor's stipulations. Both parties need to come up with a reasonable and acceptable outcome.

There also needs to be a clear curriculum connection with the services performed in order for the service learning project to be beneficial, as Rebecca Bowers Sipe states "Clear ties [must be] evident between the project and the overall expectations and goals for the class" (Qtd. in Hutchinson 430). It is a good idea for the instructor to spend a considerable amount of time discussing, first the components of service learning with the students, but also the specifics of the project they will be involved in. It is also imperative the instructor make it clear how this project ties into their course goals. The instructor may also want to outline the extra benefits of participating in a service learning project, like the opportunity to take part in a real-world experience that will produce a result that will actually benefit an outside party, as well as the chance to interact with those of diverse backgrounds. If possible, it is extremely advantageous to have a representative of the community organization come in and talk about their expectations for the project with the class.

As the course and project progresses, it is repeatedly important to allow time for open dialog on the students' experiences thus far, especially if they recently went on a field trip or interacted with the community member(s). This type of open dialog can allow for moments of class realizations. In a service learning project conducted by Robert A. Rhoads open dialog "forced [his] students to confront generalizations they had of the other. For example, students talked about various stereotypes they

held about poor people and how such stereotypes were erased as a result of their service work" (288).

Finally, reflection and evaluation at the end of the project is essential to a successful service learning experience; "both reflection and evaluation [are] an integral part of course work to support ongoing and in-depth learning" (Qtd. in Hutchinson 430). Discussion with the instructor and the students will help the students understand the benefits of their recent project, as well as an understanding of just how the project corresponded with the course goals; this discussion will also allow the instructor to evaluate the effectiveness of the project for the future. This is extremely advantageous to the instructor because it allows him/her to make any necessary adjustments to the project before incorporating it again into a course curriculum.

It is also helpful if time can be allowed for a celebration between the instructor, students, community organization coordinator, and all members within the organization that benefited from the project. A celebration of the good outcomes that were produced as a result of the project is important because it takes the time to thank everyone involved; it also allows for more time of interaction. In addition, it can again permit time for final open dialog between all who were involved, allowing for further understanding and growth of the project.

#### General Service Learning Projects for American Literature Courses

There are many service learning projects that can be done in American literature courses; the following are brief suggestions to be considered and of course expanded.

Generally students could tutor younger primary or secondary students or members of the community in reading; this would allow American literature students to answer for themselves what the value of literature is because they would be passing along important pieces of American literature to others.

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Also students could "write reviews of contemporary literature, poetry, and short stories for high school students and high school English teachers, who would really benefit from having a young person's point of view on the most up-to-date literature" ("101 Ideas" 5).

A good way to teach the beginnings of American literature would be to stress the importance of the oral tradition found in American Indian culture. Many instructors tend to overlook the American Indian origins when teaching American literature, partly because their oral tradition made many of the early texts seem nonexistent, but of course many myths and stories still endure with the American Indian community. Michael D. McNally discusses his experience including service learning in classes on American Indian traditions "This pedagogical approach, I want to suggest, can modestly incorporate some Indigenous pedagogy into classroom learning that becomes, as a result, more solid because it is more in tune with the structure as well as content of Native tradition, more memorable because human encounters work against the grain of deeply rooted stereotypes concerning Indigenous peoples, and more transforming because students emerge with a sense of both the beauty of Indigenous traditions and of what's at stake with Indigenous cultural survival" (McNally 603-4). He also discusses the importance of hearing American Indian stories in the oral tradition: "Knowledge of and stories about the past in lived moments of oral exchange are never simply locked up in bygone eras: they become tangible realities that create a felt relationship with the past that cannot easily be engendered in histories that are written and read alone. The resonant authority of an old person's voice, speaking with the economy and resonance of Ojibwe idiom, can collapse the abstraction of historical duration" (605). A service learning project incorporating the American Indian oral tradition and interacting with members of this community also serves college students because it creates an appreciation for literature at the most essential level – the basic enjoyment of listening and interpreting stories.

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McNally also relates another aspect of this service learning possibility; he suggests reading American Literature pieces that portray the Indian in racist terms because of the time in which they were written; "Unlearning racism can seldom if ever happen through book learning and essay writing alone. Service projects of any sort consistently engineer jarring experiences that stir up the tidiness of categories carried deep within students' minds" (606).

A possible service learning project to aide a section on early American literature would be for students to generate folklore of their regional area through interviews of local residents and publish these stories locally ("101 Ideas" 5). This would benefit students through the interaction they would receive with other community members, but it also would teach them how folklore develops within a community, and though it may not always be factual, it can teach one a great deal about the different cultural elements within a community, as well as the important elements that helped create and are still a part of the community. The project also benefits the community in that it preserves local folklore that may have remained undocumented.

Instructors teaching Romanticism and Transcendentalism may want to involve students in a project to help the local environment. Students could read the works of Emerson and Thoreau, among others of this era, and study their high regard for the importance of preserving the natural environment. Then, by taking part in a project to better the students' local natural environment, students can grasp a concrete understanding of what the Transcendentalists were expounding.

In teaching the era of Realism within an American literature course, instructors usually focus on the social, racial, and class inequality that shaped the era, such as the Women's Movement with stories like Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," the Reformation and the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movements with works from Stowe, Baldwin, Hayden, and Hughes, or the many stories and novels about class inequality portraying factory

and inner city conditions, like Sinclair's *The Jungle* or Crane's "Maggie – Girl of the Streets." A service learning project that focuses on a contemporary social issue might help students understand what was at stake for the authors of the era of Realism. Harvard University does a project entitled "The Literature of Social Reflection" where students "explore the ethical issues that confront those men and women who want to change the world in one way or another, those ordinary people caught up in a particular historical crisis and those who try to make sense of what others initiate politically, struggle with psychologically and endure socially" (Qtd in "101 Ideas" 5).

Elaine Norris writes about a service learning project where her class interviewed elderly residents of a nursing home about issues relating to feminism. The class read many American historical novels that dealt with feminist issues, but the experience of interviewing these residents about first hand stories of what it was like to live in this era provided an invaluable element. They also gained perspective on the residents' views of feminism today. Ageism also naturally became an issue of discussion and reflection. "Most importantly, our service-learning experience transformed our relationships with people, the most fundamental feminist goal. We engaged in learning with our senior partners as interwoven subjects of knowledge....Taking on perspectives of age and of each senior partner specifically prevented us from turning our service and learning into a self-serving patronizing experience that is ageist and inconsistent with feminist principles" (Norris 79).

Kathleen Pritchard states that "'students need to examine specific local problems in order to make international human rights standards important to them'" (Qtd. in Krain & Nurse 192). Service learning allows faces and names to be connected to real human rights issues; "immersing themselves in a real world environment helps them to see the complexity of situations faced by the people with whom they interact;" "Their real-life encounter with a human rights issue made them far more engaged with

learning and applying course concepts" (Krain & Nurse 193, 206). Interacting in situations involving contemporary social inequality can help students understand the importance of the American Realism Movement, understanding just how much these authors accomplished in writing their important works.

Jason Endacott uses service learning projects to teach the significance of historical events on today's society; he states "By stressing a concept, such as societal health, threaded throughout a course, a teacher trains students to identify the strengths and weaknesses of societies, past and present. To become effective democratic citizens, however, students must take the lessons that they learn from their studies and debates and turn them into solutions. If teachers are encouraging service learning as part of their classes, the students' proposed solutions can help extend their learning into the community" (230). Students can even become involved in a project where they interact within a contemporary social concern and then carry it further and write persuasive fictional short stories where they aim to correct the social issue, like many Realist authors did. Students can learn to reevaluate their feelings on these contemporary issues; listening carefully to these stories of others can not only create an acceptance of the other, but it may also lead the student to change his/her own previous views.

Instructors who would like to add a concrete element to their lesson on Modernism and Existentialism could incorporate a general service learning activity that helps students grasp an important component of Existentialism – one's personal responsibility to appreciate and help others. Rhoads contends that "A significant learning experience associated with community service was the opportunity to better understand the lives students worked to serve. Students were able to put faces and names with the alarming statistics and endless policy debates about homelessness as well as rural and urban poverty. As one student explained... 'Every homeless person has a name, a story'" (287).

One Particularly Effective Service Learning Project for American Literature

The service learning project that I include in my American literature course focuses on a general appreciation of literature rather than a specific literary movement. This project aims to incorporate a generational appreciation of literature. My students write children's books from the childhood stories of residents of a local nursing home, and then they visit an elementary school class where an elementary student illustrates the book. At the end of the project all involved participants meet to read the book and celebrate their accomplishment. This project has proved effective because American literature students learn the importance of capturing stories from an older generation and imparting them to a younger generation. In essence this project allows student to create their own pieces of American literature. It also encourages a basic appreciation for listening to, creating, and passing along a good story to other people.

This project is also beneficial because it naturally addresses issues related to diversity; students are given the opportunity to interact with those of various ages, social class, race, cultural background, etc.

Students also learn to support their local community in that they are capturing and passing along regional stories, which can be tied to an important aspect of American literature – stories of local color. American literature is filled with stories that capture the regional appeal of various areas throughout the United States. Southern authors like Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, and William Faulkner captured a genre unlike any other largely because of the local color included in their works. Similarly, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville were heavily influenced by their New England residence. Also authors of the Harlem Renaissance defined an era greatly because of their centralized locale.

Students involved in this project also can grasp the importance of history to the American literature canon. Historical events undoubtedly shaped a great deal of the works found within American literature. Readers are indebted to the authors who sought to capture a certain

moment in history because without their insight, an important perspective on various historical events would be lost forever. Without Steinbeck, the Great Depression may not resonate to the effect it does for new readers of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Also without Ambrose Bierce, Stephan Crane, Harriet Beecher Stowe, or Walt Whitman, the emotions involved in the Civil War may go unnoticed by contemporary students. This service learning project allows student to capture the local historical stories within their current community from the older residents of the nursing home and pass them on to a much younger generation, so that these stories do not become forgotten.

Finally, students can be challenged to connect the messages or morals of their children's books to the themes found within American literature. It is important to keep in mind that though the students are receiving the stories from the residents of the local nursing home, they still will have to take artistic freedom to embellish the story into a comprehensive children's book, with a beginning, a middle, possibly a climax, and a resolution. An overall moral to the story also should be encouraged. This moral could be broadly tied to any of the important movements found within American literature; components of Transcendentalism, and possibly Naturalism and Existential could be included, though understandably they would have to be narrated in a very basic form. Another moral could be simply to pass along the importance of the oral tradition, cultural stories, local color tales, or stories that capture the community history to others.

#### What to Do Before the Activity

First, either the service learning office at the instructor's college or the actual instructor should contact a local nursing home and elementary school. The project outline should be discussed in detail. Their involvement with the project needs to be discussed as well. They should know how much time this will take – usually classes will meet with the

residents of the nursing home as a class once for about an hour. Then students will meet once as a class with the elementary students for about an hour. Finally, at the end of the project, college students, residents of the nursing home, and elementary students may want to meet together to read and celebrate the finished project; this also takes about one hour. More time obviously may be needed depending on class size. Finally the coordinator of the nursing home, the elementary teacher, and the college instructor should all agree on dates that would work; this project works best if it is broken up throughout the semester. Also all involved members should come to an understanding of a mutual benefit for everyone involved.

Initial discussion with the American literature students about the benefits of service learning, as outlined above, is important, as is a discussion of the components of this actual project. Instructors should also discuss how the end result of this project is a comprehensive children's book with a beginning, middle, and end, as well as a moral or message at the completion of story. Instructors can also challenge students to include a theme important to American literature in their morals or messages, like the importance of the oral tradition, folklore, local color, cultural heritage, Transcendentalism, Existentialism, etc.

Also, as outlined earlier it is a good idea to have the coordinator of the nursing home and the elementary teacher visit the college course for this discussion if at all possible, though as this can be difficult, it is not essential. This initial discussion should prepare students to first meet the residents of the nursing home.

When my classes take part in this activity, we all go together to the nursing home for the first time; this makes the project logistically easier for the students because each student can be paired with a resident at one meeting. This also helps to alleviate most students' reticence at being involved in an unfamiliar situation. Time should be spent discussing what to expect on this visit – residents may not be entirely lucid, their stories

can be fragmented, and they may have certain subjects that they would prefer not to talk about. This is all normal, and can be overcome.

Students should be encouraged to listen with broad expectations as to what kind of story they want to capture. Students should be forward with the residents and tell them the components of the project and what type of stories they are searching for; it is important to tell them that they are trying to write a children's book from their story. Topics that spur dialog between the college student and the residents of the nursing home are a good idea, such as interesting childhood stories, memories of what it was like to go to school in their era, any big weather related or historical events that they remember, any community celebrations that they attended, etc. Students should note that they may not get stories of only the resident's childhood, so again, they should be encouraged to embellish the story as much as needed to make it a complete children's book.

Depending on how long students are given to meet with the residents, they may also be encouraged to set up a time to meet again on their own with the resident for a more detailed recollection of their story.

#### Materials Needed

The materials needed largely depend on the instructor's ability to print the students' books. When I conduct this project, I only need to provide about ten sheets of card stock to each student. The students don't bind the book together until two more copies have been made, so that the college student, the nursing home resident, and the elementary student all can get a copy of the book. After the copies are made, the students can bind the three copies with brackets, string, staples, etc., which will also need to be provided by the instructor. Depending on the instructor's ability to obtain copies, it is nice to be able to get two color copies of each book, since the children's illustrations are often in color, but

this is not absolutely necessary, as long as the elementary student gets the original color copy.

Also again depending on the instructor's ability to obtain mass transportation, a van or two may need to be borrowed. However, when my classes take part in this activity, we find it quite easy to car pool with our own transportation. It is up to the instructor's discretion.

### What to Do During the Activity

Once a date has been set and students have discussed the project guidelines and what to expect at the nursing home, students will go to the nursing home. Once they have arrive at the nursing home, the nursing home coordinator, who has been previously contacted, should be there to help students meet with a willing partner. When my class does this activity, the coordinator has already told the residents about our project and has asked for any volunteers who would like to participate. This is quite helpful, first because all the willing residents are in one place waiting for our class arrival, but also because they all have already approved of their involvement in this project.

Students meet with their nursing home resident for about an hour, introducing themselves and asking their predetermined questions, but also simply listening to whatever story the resident would like tell. It is helpful for the student to take notes; it is imperative that the student get the resident's name. I usually walk around and help in any way that I can. I like to take photographs of each student with their resident, as I will later do with their elementary student partner, so that they have a nice addition to add to their finished book. I then remind students and residents when it is almost time for us to go, and again encourage students to set up another time to meet with their partner independently if they feel the need.

After the class visit to the nursing home, I bring in children's books for the students to look through to see what age group they should write their book towards. Then after a couple of weeks, so the students have

enough time to turn the residents' stories into children's books, we spend class time discussing what to expect with our visit to the elementary school. Students again are told that they we will go to the elementary school as a class and again be paired with a young partner, so that the elementary student can illustrate their book as the college student reads it to them. Students should be instructed to leave various pages blank for illustrations; students should also be warned that the elementary student may or may not want to follow these guidelines.

Again, when I conduct this project, the teacher of the elementary class has told his/her students what to expect from my college students, so the elementary students are ready to take part in this activity. Once we arrive at the elementary school, the teacher of the class helps pair a college student with an elementary student. The college student then reads the story to the young student and stops periodically to let the elementary student illustrate the book whenever he/she feels it is necessary. I again walk around and ask if I can help with anything, take pictures of each pair of students, and remind them of how much time is left before we have to leave.

The college students are then given about a week to finalize their books. They hand them in to me, and I make two copies of each book. I then provide brackets, and they bind their three books.

Finally, I tell the students that we will go on one final field trip (we all meet at the nursing home to make it easier for the residents) to meet with all participating parties. The students are told that they will present and read their books to both the resident of the nursing home and the elementary student. Depending on time, the college student can either read his/her book and show the pictures to the whole group, or he/she can separate and simply read it to their nursing home and elementary student partners independently. This final celebration is always rewarding for everyone involved. Refreshments are provided; everyone gets a copy of the book, and there is time for generational interaction, as this is the first

time the elementary child can meet with the nursing home resident. This celebration allows the college student, and hopefully everyone else who was involved time to see the concrete benefits of their class work; "Through the celebration of democratic diversity, a deeper understanding of stranger encounters can be developed—a nation far beyond being tolerant or appreciative" (Sheffield 52).

#### What to do after the Activity

After the celebration, a class discussion, as stated earlier in this paper, is quite beneficial as a time of reflection. I ask my students to write up a one page essay on their interpretation of the project beforehand. During class time I ask them to then discuss their essays with the class; this helps some students see and understand components of the project that they may have previously overlooked; it also helps me understand how I can improve on the project next time, as I encourage honest discussion of their experiences.

I also ask students to connect this experience with American literature in general; I ask them how they feel this project helped them learn the components discussed in the course. Many times they have revealed to me connections that I did not initially conceive.

#### Appraisal

Though this service learning project may be difficult to employ, it is worth it.

Students achieve some of the highest goals college instructors want their students to obtain; they interact with diverse groups of people and often create a story that is centered on a subject matter that was initially unfamiliar to them. They learn skills to cope in a real-world setting, as well as see the benefit of creating an assignment that has a concrete benefit for others; "Because service encourages students to see themselves as intimately to the other, a learning context is created in

which the caring self is more likely to emerge. Fostering a sense of self grounded in an ethic of care is one of the central challenges of education and becomes increasingly important as our society grows more diverse. By fostering an ethic of care, higher education encourages the sense of otherness needed for democracy to service and, indeed, thrive in a complex and fragmented social world" (Rhoads 294). Students learn the importance of community service, as well as goals attributed directly with the American literature course they are taking. They learn in a tangible way the importance of the oral tradition, folklore, history, diversity, local color, and philosophies like Transcendentalism and Existentialism to American literature. But most significantly students learn a love of literature at its basic level through creating it and passing it on through generations.

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