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Avoiding the Savior Complex in Community-Engaged Writing *Charisse S. Iglesias*

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Avoiding the Savior Complex in Community-Engaged Writing

Charisse S. Iglesias

Overview

“Avoiding the Savior Complex in Community-Engaged Writing” is a three-day activity to prepare students for community-engaged writing partnerships. Community-engaged writing is a common undertaking in composition courses (Schutz and Gere). While community-engaged writing encourages civic responsibility, exposure to different communities, and engaged pedagogies, the practice does not always value the expertise of communities (Shah). Due to various obstacles, university partners often undervalue and underrepresent the communities with which they work. Obstacles such as the savior complex, specifically, limit the co-constructed knowledge production that community-university partners can engage in by developing a server-served relationship. This activity shows students how to engage in reciprocal working partnerships in community-engaged writing to reconstruct the traditional positioning of university as expert and community as recipient, essentially deconstructing systems of power. Reciprocity (Dostilio et al.) is the instrument that helps facilitate effective community-university partnerships due to its function to promote generative partnerships. Reconstructing positions of influence works by negotiating differences and aligning communication strategies, which is important because community partners “have critical insight” and “become invaluable partners” to knowledge production (Shah 16). Using reflection, popular articles, and real-life scenarios, this three-day activity describes strategies for students to practice reciprocal working partnerships in community-engaged writing.

Time Commitment

3 class sessions

Materials

Materials needed include a classroom computer and projector, access to internet, and a PDF reader (i.e., Adobe Acrobat).

Activity Process

- Students will be introduced to their community writing projects and discuss the assigned reading on reciprocity (Dostilio et al.), and the assigned reading on the savior complex (Flaherty). Students will reflect on their past experiences working with communities or volunteering to pinpoint instances of practicing reciprocity and harboring a savior complex.
- Next, students will discuss the dangers of the savior complex in community engagement. Using popular articles about Savior Barbie (Zane)—a fake Instagram account of a Barbie doll “saving children” in Africa—and the exploitation of orphanages in developing countries (Lu), this step showcases the effects of harboring a savior complex when working with communities. Students will problem-solve the Savior Barbie and orphanage examples and decide how those could be made into opportunities for practicing reciprocity.
- Then, students will assess sample student reflection questions from various service-learning handbooks (Iglesias) to show the rhetorical power of words shaping perception. Students will compare and assess how different framing techniques affect the way students interpret their experiences working with communities. A discussion of how these framing techniques are representative of reciprocity in the sample student reflection questions will follow. Finally, students will make plans for practicing reciprocity—while avoiding the savior complex—in their own community writing partnerships.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Gain an understanding of how reciprocity benefits both university and community partners in community-engaged writing
- Think critically about rhetorical framing techniques and how words can be used to (un)fairly represent certain experiences and people
- Think critically about the savior complex and their own preconceptions of what it means to be in a community-engaged partnership

Learning Accommodations

- Students may choose two different forms of participation in this activity, as a discussion leader or note-taker, in order to maximize engagement and accommodate different learning styles.
- Material should be presented in multiple formats to include in-person instruction and asynchronous, digital delivery.
- Instructor should encourage students to work through their discomfort—in regards to whiteness—through ground rules, generative discussion protocols, and self-reflection.

Works Cited

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Shah, Rachael S. *Rewriting Partnerships: Community Perspectives on Community-Based Learning*. University Press of Colorado, 2020.

Zane, Damian. "Barbie Challenges the 'White Savior Complex.'" *BBC*, 1 May 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36132482>.

Further Reading

Eby, John. W. "Why Service-learning is Bad." *Service Learning, General*, vol. 27, 1998, pp. 1-10.

Illich, Ivan. "To Hell with Good Intentions." *Address for the Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects*, 1968.

Mitchell, Tania D. "Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2008, pp. 50-65.