How Sincere?: A Rhetorical Analysis of Reflections on Service

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Disconnect in Reflective Writing

Reflection through writing is an integral element of service learning courses. As Bringle and Hatcher say, "Service learning deliberately integrates community service activities with educational objectives" (1999, 113), and "writing is a special form of reflection through which new meaning can be created, new understanding of problems can become circumscribed, and new ways of organizing experiences can be developed" (1999, 115). Reflection can be defined as the "intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives" (Hatcher and Bringle 1997, 153). As a freshman at The George Washington University, I enrolled in a service learning themed writing course. As part of the curriculum, each student kept a blog of reflective posts that are public to the rest of the class. As the course content developed and as I had my own experiences with my community organization of choice, I began to think about the sincerity of the discourse of some of my peers' reflections.

Oftentimes, I find that there seems to exist a disconnect between the high level of meaningful interactions students experience and the diction they use to describe those experiences. For example, a student may explain, "I had an extremely meaningful experience" with service, but then the student may devalue his or her reflection by using rhetoric that belittles the people with whom he or she interacted. Often, so much so that it feels cliché, these reflections can even conclude naïvely, or in a way that suggests possible lack of empathy or understanding.

When reading a reflection from a service learning course, one may consider sincerity, or rather the cues the reader will be using, to understand the writer's sincerity. Service learning professor Bruce Herzberg expresses his concern with the sincerity of completed assignments by his students:

> A colleague reported hearing a conversation between two students: "We're going to some shelter tomorrow and we have to write about it." "No sweat. Write that before you went, you had no sympathy for the homeless, but the visit to the shelter opened your eyes. Easy A."[1] Even for those whose awakening is genuine, there is reason to doubt that the epiphany includes an understanding of the social forces that produce and sustain poverty, illiteracy, discrimination, and injustice. There is little evidence that students spontaneously gain critical self-consciousness — an awareness of the ways that their lives have been shaped by the very same forces, that what they regard as "choices" are less matters of individual will. (1994, 309)

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[1] A note from Herzberg: "I reported this conversation to Zlotkowski, who responded that he believed that many students remained defensive about the fact that they really did have their eyes opened. In anonymous student evaluations that have no effect on grades, he finds a predominance of sincere reports of changed attitudes."

In the context of reflections in service learning, I define an examination of sincerity as not an evaluation of whether the author's feelings are sincere and true, but rather whether the "meaningful" factor of the described community interaction is sincere and true to the extent that it is described. That is, I explore *the rhetoric* of service learning reflections, not the students' characters.

Drawing on concepts developed by Eileen Schell, a scholar who explores how rhetoric is used to advocate for social change, I have created a scale — a scale of sincerity — that can examine "sincerity" as I have defined the term. I present a case study where I apply this scale of sincerity to analyze a group of essays by my peers. I conclude that in the context of service learning, the nature of the reflective assignment may elicit lack of sincerity.

Schell: Rhetorical Strategies Defined

Eileen Schell groups types of rhetoric together based on how they make the reader feel; she analyzes them and applies them to the Farm Crisis[2]. According to Schell, the different ways media portrays a social issue can be divided into four rhetorical categories: tragedy, sympathetic identification, smart diversification, and mutuality.

Schell favors rhetoric of mutuality, and she points out flaws in all other rhetorical strategies which she defines. Mutual identification "involves feeling a sense of connection and solidarity with the struggle of others" (Schell 2007, 94) by helping the reader identify his/her role in an issue. This rhetorical strategy "addresses how [a] crisis affects all people," emphasizing common interests of people on all sides of an issue of concern. Rhetoric of mutuality heavily focuses on interconnectedness (Schell 2007, 98).

Smart diversification, in the context of the Farm Crisis, emphasizes how farmers can pull themselves from poverty, highlighting the adaptability of farmers and tapping into the very American ideal of support for the underdog. It demonstrates working within a system. For example, an organization that provides tutoring to illegal immigrants living in poverty may be classified as using smart diversification because it is working within the system of poverty and not directly tackling the policies that brought the immigrants to poverty. Schell criticizes rhetoric of smart diversification because she believes that it does not intervene at the root of social issues.

Rhetoric of sympathetic identification "involves feeling sad or sorry for others going through hardship" (Schell 2007, 94), connecting the reader, in the context of the Farm Crisis, to the "suffering of the farm family" (Schell 2007, 93) by shared emotion, rather than connecting a reader to his/her personal role in a larger issue. Schell identifies a limitation of sympathetic identification because she feels it fails to "emphasize the structural realities [of] the federal and international policies" that bring about social problems (Schell 2007, 93). She also criticizes sympathetic identification for painting the farmers as "passive victims rather than active agents" (Schell 2007, 95). She views this rhetoric as unhelpful because the small farmers were, in many cases, actually active agents of their own downfall rather than passive sufferers. Schell's worry for sympathetic identification closely resembles her worry for tragedy: that these tactics will only result in empty sympathy or pity, without any real commitment or partnership.

Schell is most critical of rhetoric of tragedy, which "emphasizes ruin and downfall, hardship and suffering, the material realities — policies and practices — by which the food production system came to this point are underplayed and mostly invisible" (Schell 2007, 95).

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[2] The Farm Crisis is a term Eileen Schell defines as the decline of small farms and locally grown food, the rise of industrialized agriculture and unhealthy food, and the use of pesticides.

Schell emphasizes that it underplays the policies and practices which caused such misfortune. This rhetorical strategy explains a problem in a way that makes a reader feel as if the situation is hopeless, that there is no solution. Diction that describes resigned destruction can reveal a tone of tragedy.

Scale of Sincerity

As part of my service learning course, I worked at LPTM (Life Pieces to Masterpieces), an art-oriented after-school program devoted to character development and education enhancement for black male children. The ultimate purpose of this organization is to change a damaging absence of African American male role models within the community by creating a safe space for children who may be affected by negative elements. After a few weekly sessions with LPTM, I posted the following reflection to my class blog:

> It's much easier to get to know the kids when we're in smaller groups like this. I think after you know them, it's really hard to use rhetoric of sympathetic identification and especially rhetoric of tragedy in reference to them. It makes me think that these specific rhetorical strategies could almost be dehumanizing. I find it difficult to describe the kids involved with this organization in the same way now as I did before I started volunteering with LPTM. Of course, I'm not there for most aspects of their life, but they all seem like pretty normal (and awesome!!!) kids to me!

In this particular context, I wrote "normal" to distance myself from how I would previously define the children in this program — simply, as different than me. And, as I developed relationships with the participants of this program, I could feel this gap between how I see myself and how I see the "gentlemen"[3] of LPTM close. Before I started working with LPTM, I would have described the organization using rhetoric of tragedy and rhetoric of sympathetic identification. After I began to develop relationships with some of the children, I found it difficult and even uncomfortable to describe LPTM using elements of tragedy.

From analyzing this personal experience and my classmates' reflections and by recontextualizing Schell's discussion of rhetorical strategies, I theorize that it is difficult to bring oneself to use rhetoric of tragedy to describe a person, a group of people, or a community organization after developing fuller relationships with them. Below, I have recontextualized Eileen Schell's analysis of rhetorical strategies to create a Scale of Sincerity for analyzing the rhetoric in service learning reflections, associating use of tragedy with insincerity and use of mutuality with sincerity.

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x-------------------------x-----------------------------------x----------------------------x
 tragedy[4]        sympathetic identification      smart diversification      mutual identification
(least sincere)                                                                  (most sincere)
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[3] This is the vocabulary used at LPTM to describe the children.

[4] Overwhelming presence of diction that resembles tragedy serves as an indication of insincerity; however little use of tragedy is forgiving, for presence of tragedy in a limited form may only indicate lack of knowledge associated with service learning.
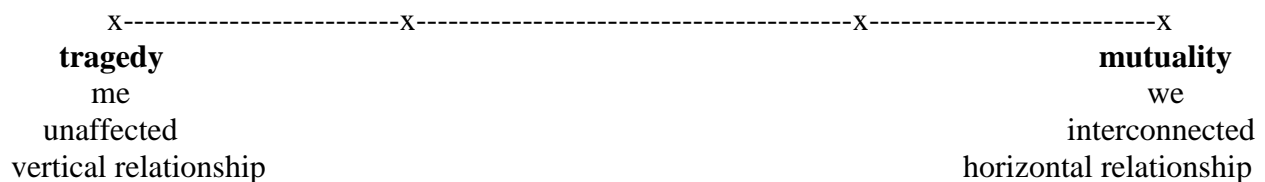
Scale of Sincerity: Application

Because rhetorical analysis is a fluid concept, I have chosen to focus on the polar ends of my scale which feature rhetoric of tragedy and rhetoric of mutuality. In the context of the Farm Crisis, the central idea that separates mutual identification from tragedy is that "instead of identifying farmers as victims and objects of pity, as they are often portrayed in the tragedy narrative, readers/viewers [of rhetoric of mutual identification] can begin to see the situation of farmers as interconnected with their own concerns for healthy communities and healthy food" (Schell 2007, 98). Mutual identification very much revolves around interconnectedness and the creation of a horizontal relationship.

If diction heavily resembles rhetoric of tragedy, the author signals to the reader the possibility that he or she may not have developed full relationships with the community members, even if the rest of the essay professes otherwise. By "signaling," I refer to Michael Spence's (1973) use of the term which he places in the context of applications for jobs or admission to a college; applicants indirectly communicate, or "signal," information about themselves to the reader by describing themselves in a certain way. The concept of "signaling" can also be applied to service learning reflective writing pieces. The rhetoric a student uses can signal varying levels of sincerity of community involvement.

If resemblance with rhetoric of tragedy is very overwhelming, the author suggests the possibility that there may exist some form of detachment — that he or she may not have been as involved or invested as he or she tries to convince. If diction used to describe a service learning experience closely resembles rhetoric of mutual identification, the author signals the sincerity of a meaningful experience to the reader.

I have illustrated the polar ends of the Scale of Sincerity: featuring only rhetoric of tragedy and rhetoric of mutuality. To expand on the polar ends of this scale, I have listed below "tragedy" terms that I associate with rhetoric of tragedy in the context of service learning, and also under "mutuality," a list of the concepts I associate with rhetoric of mutual identification in the context of service learning. Each subsequent term under "tragedy" corresponds with its counterpart directly across and listed under "mutuality." Each pair of concepts can be thought of as a scale that runs parallel to that of tragedy and mutuality.

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  x--------------------------x-----------------------------------------x--------------------------x
  tragedy                                                                          mutuality
     me                                                                               we
  unaffected                                                                      interconnected
vertical relationship                                                      horizontal relationship
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The parallel scale of "me" versus "we" draws attention to the distance between focus on how one's actions affect oneself (essentially a self-reflection) — the "me" — and focus on how one's actions affects others — the "we." Furthermore, the concept of "unaffected" versus "interconnected" focuses on the distance between one who feels like an outsider supporting a cause that has no effect on himself or herself — the "unaffected" — and one who feels affected and involved in everything he or she contributes or declines to contribute — the "interconnected." Lastly, a vertical relationship demonstrates a one-way flow from a defined giving end to a defined receiving end, where one partner is above the other. A horizontal relationship demonstrates equality, where both partners are giving and receiving meaningful lessons, and neither partner is placed above the other.

Analysis of Origin Stories

I have analyzed a group of 50 essay blog-posts titled "Origin Stories" by students in my service-learning themed writing course, "Writing for Social Change," taught by Dr. Phyllis Ryder. In the context of this course and community-based work, the term "origin story" refers to background information about the journey of a community organization. For the first assignment of the course, the students were instructed to write their own origin stories and to post them to the class blog. Professor Ryder's directions read as follows:

> Introduce yourself to the class with a story about how you got here — how did you become interested in community-based work OR how did you become the writer you are (whatever kind of writer you are) OR both.

Ideally, "reflection activities direct the student's attention to new interpretations of events and provide a means through which the community service can be studied and interpreted, much as text is read and studied for deeper understanding" (Bringle and Hatcher 1999, 114). The struggle of writing self-reflection is that the nature of the assignment pushes the writer toward the tragedy side of the scale of sincerity. "*Self*-reflection" pushes the reader towards "me," which begs the accompaniment of "unaffected" and the sense of a vertical relationship. It is the challenge of the writer to gear the essay toward mutuality and reciprocity even when the directions push the author toward tragedy — to strike a healthy balance between both ends of the scale of sincerity.

I have chosen quotations from "Origin Stories" which I identified as either belittling in their respective contexts or that demonstrate mutuality. To protect anonymity, I have left out author names. I attempt to strike a balance between removing enough context so as not to personally attack any students (this is a rhetorical analysis about essays and the reflection assignment, not the writers themselves), but to also keep just enough context to demonstrate the connection to diction.

Tragedy in the Origin Stories

Many of these blog entries conclude with sentiments of naivety. For example, many of them conclude with feeling lucky or blessed by their own privilege, something that being with people of lower socioeconomic statuses helped them realize, for which they are grateful. Many of these conclusions coincide with diction that resembles tragedy. For example, using words like "needy" or "less" push the tone of an essay to the tragedy side of the spectrum. Excessive use of tragedy also delegitimizes any awakening or learning experience that a student describes a service learning interaction bringing them. The following are some quotations I have selected from Origin Stories that resemble tragedy; I have underlined words that contribute to a tone of tragedy:

- "the <u>struggle</u> of living on <u>less</u>"
- "the difference community service can make in the lives of the <u>less fortunate</u>."
- "...imagine what it was like to live in <u>less privileged</u> areas"
- "By appearance alone you could tell that he was raised in an <u>underprivileged</u> family..."
- "[they] had <u>little</u> to <u>nothing</u> and <u>suffered</u> from very <u>stressful</u> living situations"
- "<u>struggles</u> of their families"
- "<u>miserable</u> children"
- "During my study halls, I would drive to an <u>underprivileged</u> elementary school"

Sometimes, use of tragedy is less explicit. Sometimes, other words with positive connotations seem to hide or balance out diction that perpetuates tragedy. In the context of describing community organizations and experience, words like "help" and "service" have stirred much debate; one-sided verbs like these project vertical relationships between the volunteers and those to whom they have dedicated their time. The following is a collection of quotations from Origin Stories that exemplify this concept; I have underlined "hiding words," like "help" and words that contribute to tragedy:

- "When I left [developing country] with all reluctance, I began to realize my inner desire to help those in need"
- "[they] inspired me to help the less fortunate within my community"
- "help less fortunate children"
- "...helping those in need, and realizing how fortunate some of us are"
- "help create meals for families in need"
- "...I helped someone in need"
- "helping people who I genuinely felt were in need"

Though this may seem harmless, use of words like "help" and "serve" in this manner is dangerous because it dresses up tragedy and ignores the negative implications this rhetorical strategy brings.

Another type of belittlement can be found in the level to which the author attempts to separate himself or herself from those with whom they volunteer. Students may create a sense of separation by pulling themselves up; likewise, they may also create separation by pushing others below them. A student may belittle the people he/she works with in his/her service learning project, bringing them down by use of demeaning diction in his/her description of community experiences. For example, using the word "underprivileged" as a way to describe one's culture or how he or she grew up pushes the "receiving end" of a vertical relationship farther beneath its already forced subservient position.

Additionally, students who excessively allude to their privilege show an attempt to build a separation between themselves and those they are working with. For example, many students in reflection on service work acknowledge their own privilege in their writing for the purpose of giving context. However, if the writing piece puts overwhelming attention on the privilege of the author or lack thereof for those with whom he/she volunteers, he or she suggests a possible insecurity that the reader may mistake him/her for a core activist instead of an allied activist. As Kraemer defines the term, "*Core* activists" are defined as "members of the group whose grievances are being raised, [for example], blacks in the Civil Rights Movement" (Kraemer 2007, 20); *Allies* are activists as well, but they "come from other social groups, like [for example], whites or Hispanics in the Civil Rights Movement" – they *support* the core activists (Kraemer 2007, 20).

Acknowledging one's own privilege is extremely important; however, if the author abundantly acknowledges his or her own privilege, but fails to demonstrate an understanding of what that means and how that affects others, he or she may communicate to the reader a lack of understanding by omitting such a key piece to personal privilege acknowledgement. Additionally, referring to privilege so much so that the reader feels it is overwhelming constructs a vertical relationship between the student and the community partners he or she describes. This vertical relationship is an extension of rhetoric of tragedy, and suggests relationships that are not fully formed — what is *insincere* is an attempt to convince the reader of a dynamic and developed relationship with a community partner, when rhetoric suggests otherwise. Below, I

have collected quotations from Origin Stories in which the author acknowledges his or her own privilege. I have underlined diction that contributes to an attempt at separation:

- "Working with kids from <u>backgrounds that were so different from mine</u> was an incredibly rewarding and humbling experience"
- "I lived in my own <u>bubble</u>"
- "...because we are <u>blessed</u>"
- "[they] instilled the idea that service is an obligation for those who are <u>blessed</u> enough to live in a world that is free of any debilitating conflict like <u>poverty</u> and <u>discrimination</u>."
- "...I realized that I had a <u>good life</u>."
- "<u>After being with them I am so much more grateful for the education and the opportunities that I have received and continue to receive.</u>"
- "Be <u>grateful</u> for what you have because some people dream of the things you <u>take for granted</u>"
- "I'm actually from a very <u>privileged</u> suburb"
- "This experience has caused me to build the courage to stand up and be strong for people who cannot necessarily stand up and be strong for themselves"
- "I felt that I had a duty to <u>help</u> the people that society has <u>left behind</u> – those who have not had the <u>opportunities</u> that I have had."
- "I learned how to be grateful for being able to live in [the U.S.] and for enjoying commodities that were non-existent to the community of [village]"

Service learning "experiences are miseducative when they fail to stimulate critical thought and they more deeply entrench existing schemata" (Bringle and Hatcher 1999, 114). These elements of tragedy found in Origin Stories — negative words, "hiding words," or an overwhelming reference to privilege — that are found in the introductory assignments analyzed in this article are examples of these "existing schemata" that students may already have when they begin a service-learning course.

Mutuality in the Origin Stories

Though many of the Origin Stories rely on rhetoric of tragedy, some use rhetoric of mutuality. In these essays, rhetoric of mutual identification can be identified in diction, the underlying tone of the piece, or even in the conclusions. The pieces that rely on rhetoric of mutual identification focus on the concepts of "we," "interconnected," and resemble a "horizontal relationship." Below are some examples of quotations that express mutuality:

- "By doing good we are able to benefit everyone"
- " [Name of person] taught me more than I could teach him, and left me looking for more ways to get involved."
- "Now, I had an opportunity to not just receive, but give back"
- "Taking time to step back from my own worries and do what I could to help others impacted me in ways I never could have imagined."
- When you create these types of connections with someone you are no longer just helping them, you are supporting them. They become someone who you care deeply for. Volunteering at [community organization], I was able to create these connections with many of the students and parents I worked with.

Elements of mutual identification in Origin Stories were much fewer and much more difficult to find than rhetoric of tragedy, which conversely, was not difficult to find at all. In fact, the presence of rhetoric of tragedy seemed overabundant.

Conclusions

Because the origin story assignment was conducted at the very beginning of the course, before any service-learning experience, the students probably lacked genuine knowledge about service learning. However, the students did have *service* experience (without the "learning" in "service learning") and their unknowingly overwhelming use of tragedy suggests that because the characters in their origin stories are generally not described with utmost respect and in a manner that resembles reciprocity, the relationships the students developed with community partners prior to taking Professor Ryder's course were probably quite static and underdeveloped. This is consistent with the abundant use of tragedy in the origin stories.

This finding also suggests that there may exist some sort of issue with the reflective assignment in general — that the assignment to reflect on a service experience may possibly elicit lack of sincerity. The very instructions to "self-reflect" push the author toward "me," a concept I have assigned to associate with tragedy. The nature of the assignment welcomes insincerity. Students are challenged with reflecting on their experiences in an assignment that pushes them toward the tragedy end of the scale of sincerity, when a student really should be pushed to think in terms of mutuality.

When an author relies on rhetoric of tragedy, he or she may only be innocently responding to a prompt with such a well-defined and expected response — using rhetoric of tragedy and writing about privilege almost becomes automatic, even robotic. Many authors of reflective service learning pieces may, without even realizing, easily fall into a discourse of insincerity even when their feelings and experiences are sincere.

The instructions of a reflective assignment should allow students to express their lack of understanding if that is where they truly are in their service-learning journey, for "students differ in how easily they engage in reflection and how quickly they mature in ability to learn from reflection" (Bringle and Hatcher 1999, 116); but, the instructions should be very carefully constructed so as to not set a student up to be insincere. "The structure of a reflection activity can influence the results of a service experience: whether they will be educative and lead to new ways of thinking or acting, or miseducative and reinforce existing schemata and stereotypes" (Bringle and Hatcher 1999, 118). When the author uses the rhetoric of mutuality, he or she projects sincerity.

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