

Cheryl Lester Portfolio
ENGL 336/AMS 344
Spring 2006

TITLE: Service Learning and Jewish American Identities: Engaging with the Construction of Identities in Cultural Texts and in Everyday Life

Summary: Students in an upper-level undergraduate course studied and analyzed the social construction of Jewish American identities in everyday life through textual analysis and service learning.

I. LEVEL ONE ABSTRACTS

I. Background

In an upper-level undergraduate course entitled Jewish American Literature and Culture, which was cross-listed in English and American Studies, students engaged in textual analysis and service learning to examine Jewish American identities not as fixed, inherited essences but rather as fluid social and cultural productions that are subject to constant negotiation and debate as they circulate among readers and in everyday life. Students learn to isolate and analyze these negotiations and debates as they engage with cultural texts (literature, films, ads, popular music, etc.) and with the circulation of meanings in daily life as they change over time and from place to place. The course exposes students, primarily juniors and seniors fulfilling a requirement for the English or American Studies major, seeking junior- or senior-level courses to fulfill General Education requirements, or simply interested in Jewish literature and culture, to Jewish cultural content and provides them with the theoretical awareness and analytic skills to recognize that group identities are not fixed or unified. Instead, students learn to view identities as multiple and changing as they circulate in time and place, intersect with other identity positions such as gender and age, and respond to social action.

I. Implementation

Through a sequence of class discussions and staged writing assignments, students worked with a cultural text or on a service learning project to demonstrate how Jewish American identities are constructed through cultural forms and practices in everyday life. They were asked to describe, analyze, and synthesize their material in three separate stages. First, they were asked to describe the cultural text or service learning setting with which they were working. Second, service learners were asked to isolate some aspect, e.g., narrative, behavior, incident, structure, of that text or setting and analyze its role in negotiating, asserting, or challenging the meaning of Jewish American identity. Students working with literary texts were asked to gather and present material from relevant secondary sources that addressed a pertinent topic or narrative feature of the text. Third, students were asked to place their individual projects in the broader context of core course readings, themes, and discussions. In a final paper, students synthesized their learning and summarized it in a brief oral presentation to the entire class.

I. Student Performance

Through the content of readings, service learning projects, class discussions, and written assignments, students developed and demonstrated their awareness of the creative and everyday cultural forms and processes through which group identities, specifically Jewish American identities, are formed, negotiated, and transformed in shifting historical contexts and in relation to other identities, pressures and limits. Through a sequence of short paper assignments on and discussions about description, analysis, and synthesis, students had an opportunity to receive and respond to feedback in advance of their final paper. The literary texts and service learning settings enabled students to consider how identity formation involves negotiations over such matters as language use, national origins, immigration history, racial status, citizenship, social class, war, transnationalism, gender, and sexuality.

I. Reflections

To better reach my goals for this course through the analysis of cultural texts and service learning, I intend to make a few changes:

- I want to provide more reading and writing assignments that focus on everyday processes of identity-formation and that show how identities change over time and from place to place.
- I want to draw more frequent and explicit parallels and demonstrate the circulation that connects cultural texts (not only their content but also how they are produced and consumed) to everyday behaviors, actions, and practices.

II. LEVEL TWO INFORMATION

II. Background

The course goals are for students to:

1. Analyze cultural representations of American Jewishness and how they change over time and across cultures,
2. Critically view the processes through which the meanings and values of Jewishness are produced and circulated in literature, culture, and everyday life, and
3. Recognize that human action plays a part in the production and circulation of meaning and values about Jewishness in American culture.

The course addresses these goals through the isolation and analysis of processes that appear in literary and other cultural texts and as they occur in everyday life. By reflecting on these processes, students with a variety of backgrounds and attitudes learn about the history, multiplicity, debate, and constant flux of identities, specifically Jewish American identities. Whether students present themselves as insiders or outsiders, they all face the challenge of learning to reflect critically on their self-presentation and on the identity and knowledge claims that support them. Students challenge the definitions and/or beliefs about American Jewish identities that they invariably bring with them to this class and

consider the social, cultural, political, and legal pressures and limits that may reinforce or obstruct them. Students interrogate the bases for their claims, for example, in connection with their understanding and experience of rituals and customs that constitute insider knowledge, e.g., about mourning practices, traditions of Sabbath, Jewish holidays, kosher and dietary issues. In practice, variations in Jewish and non-Jewish self-identifications and questions about what constitutes belonging are at the core of issues most important to the course. What does it mean to have a grandmother who was Jewish, one Jewish parent, high or low levels of ritual observance, and wide-ranging attitudes and beliefs about what is and is not “Jewish”? Students challenge the definitions and/or beliefs about American Jewish identities that they invariably bring with them to this class and consider the social, cultural, political, and legal pressures and limits that may reinforce or obstruct them. Through reflection, analysis, and discussion, they learn that identities are not essential but are produced through social processes that change with time and place, processes in which they have roles and responsibilities as participants.

II. Implementation

Most of the core readings were drawn from an anthology of Jewish American literature from the 17th to the 20th century, and included not simply prose narratives and poetry written in English or translated from Hebrew and Yiddish but also historical documents, open and private letters, jokes, song lyrics, graphic novels, etc. Students were given the option of undertaking individual projects related to literary analysis and discussion of one of five prose texts or service learning opportunities in Lawrence or Kansas City.

Through a sequence of three writing assignments, students had an opportunity to reflect on their individual projects as illustrations of the processes through which Jewish American identities are made, unmade, and remade through cultural forms and practices that occur in everyday life. Grading rubrics, developed in consultation with CTE helped clarify and detail the goals and evaluative criteria for each paper, made my grading and commentary more consistent and comprehensible students. ([LINK to RUBRICS HERE](#))

Literary Analysis Project Components:

For students working with literary texts, the first assignment required them to offer a brief summary of the text and to select a theme or textual passage that demonstrated or related to identity-construction and that required closer analysis. The second assignment required students to research and discuss six secondary sources that addressed the theme or passage of interest to them in the text. The third assignment asked students to present and exchange their ideas about the text in a small book discussion group and, since not all the students read these texts, served to establish some common ground for the final oral presentations in which students presented brief summaries of their projects to their peers for feedback and discussion.

Service Learning Project Components:

The service learning opportunities were developed through consultation with Jewish community leaders in Lawrence and Kansas City and staff at the KU Center for Service Learning. A call for proposals was widely distributed to community organizations in Lawrence and Kansas City and resulted in an array of service learning options for the

students. A service learning contract, timetable, and report form helped supervisors and students reach clear agreements about expectations and goals and directed supervisors to provide uniform feedback on student performance. (LINK to SERVICE LEARNING MATERIALS HERE)

For the service learning projects, the first assignment required students to describe their service learning responsibilities and qualifications for undertaking them. The second assignment required them to use thick description to present their setting and to analyze an aspect or incident in their work that demonstrated processes of identity-construction and that challenged them to explore and analyze these processes further. The third assignment asked students to place their analysis within the context of discussions and issues that arose in connection with core readings from the class.

II. Student Performance

The staged writing assignments enabled students to develop thoughtful responses to the production of American Jewish identity in a literary text or service learning setting and gave them an opportunity to work at improving the required skills of description, critical analysis of literary texts and everyday experience, identification and comparative analysis of relevant secondary sources as contexts for their own analyses, and critical and persuasive argumentation. The final papers and oral presentations offered students the opportunity to select and synthesize what they learned over the course of the semester about the production of Jewish American identities in a literary analysis text or service learning setting. Written work demonstrated that some students had meaningful service learning experiences, for example, documenting the content of video testimonies of local Holocaust survivors at the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education, interacting with senior citizens at a breakfast program in Kansas City, writing press releases on Jewish events for the *Kansas City Jewish Chronicle*, helping with the planning of an American Library Association-sponsored book discussion series on Jewish literature to take place in Johnson County, and participating in the planning and hosting of cultural events at the Kansas City Jewish Community Center. From viewing and indexing videotaped survivor testimonies at the Midwest Holocaust Center or developing Public Relations copy for KU Hillel to reading and discussing novels about multigenerational conflicts in 20th-century Jewish American families, students learned that Jewish American identities are multiple, contested, and involve struggles over values in which they count as participants. The projects gave students an opportunity to demonstrate their awareness of key themes and issues, including immigration, assimilation, transnational identities, hybrid and intersectional identities (gender, age, race, etc.), Hebrew and Yiddish language, Jewish religious learning, Jewish affiliation and non-affiliation, citizenship, memories and intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust, Zionism and post-Zionism, connection to Israel, etc. (LINK TO Final Projects here.)

II. Reflections

Book discussions and service learning projects helped students connect literary representations, reading practices, and textual study to everyday cultural contexts and social practices and understand how both serve to shape social identities. Student writing

and oral presentations enabled students to recognize how American Jewish identities change over time and place and in the context of competing pressures and limits. Students benefit from multiple opportunities for observing, discussing, and writing about how contexts shape different and new identities and how multiple identities are negotiated and debated. Literary textual analysis and service learning opportunities provided students with rich examples of how contexts shape different and often warring American Jewish identities and highlight defining features of identities, such as national, transnational, and diasporic origins and affiliations; religious and secular practices; age and ability; gender roles and opportunities; racial character; stereotypes, anti-Semitism, and historical persecution.

III. CLICK BACK MATERIAL

III. Background

Syllabus (Syllabus Spring 06.doc)

Contract (Service Learning Contract.doc)

Service Learning Projects (Service Learning Projects Sp 06.doc)

Book Discussion Projects (Book Discussion Projects Sp 06.doc)

Service Learning Evaluation Forms (Service Learning Evaluation Forms.doc)

III. Implementation

Paper One Rubric (Paper One Rubric.doc)

Paper Two Rubric (Paper Two Rubric.doc)

Paper Three Rubric (Paper Three Rubric.doc)

Final Paper and Oral Presentation Rubric (Final Paper and Oral Presentation Rubric.doc)

III. Student Performance

Student Portfolio: Book Discussion Final Project #1

Student Portfolio: Book Discussion Final Project #2

Student Portfolio: Service Learning Final Project #1

Student Portfolio: Service Learning Final Project #2

Instructor Comments on Final Papers (link)

Service Learning Final paper "A-":

This final paper was the end result of three earlier short papers and a final draft and, despite its flaws, represents an excellent effort at bringing reflection to bear on 20 hours of service to the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education and on evaluations, commentaries, and meetings about her earlier papers and service (which was rated "excellent" in all categories by her supervisor). With little prior knowledge about the Holocaust or the experiences of Holocaust survivors, this student volunteered her time to enter information about local Holocaust survivors in a database and watch videotaped testimonies of their life experiences. Watching the videos helped her with the task of typing up and creating computer files of handwritten transcripts of the testimonies and creating index terms for the database so that the videotapes will be more accessible and useful for research. The student found a surprising diversity of experiences among

Holocaust survivors and wrote in one of the short papers about the emotional difficulty of listening to testimonies of horrible, unimaginable, and painful suffering. In a subsequent paper, she drew on class discussions about Holocaust literature to formulate responses to material that she found difficult to bear. By considering factors like age or gender, she was able to bring analysis to bear on her emotional reaction to the material and delineate what she had earlier described as the diversity of experiences among Holocaust survivors. Her final paper tackled the question of why these testimonies matter, however difficult they are to bear, and why institutions like MCHE should gather and preserve them, concluding that “[w]hile the testimonies are heartbreaking and horrible to watch, the history is too important to be neglected.”

Service Learning Final paper “C”:

This final paper draft was the end result of three earlier short papers and did not reflect any revision to address questions, comments, and suggestions that encouraged this student to reflect critically on nearly 20 hours of service to KU Hillel (which was rated “above average” by her supervisor). The draft demonstrated limited critical engagement with my commentaries or class materials and discussions. The student was encouraged to develop her ideas and reflections on the significance of holiday celebrations at KU Hillel and of her concept of “the inner spark” that makes individuals “actually...want to become a part of [their] religion and other people that share it with [them].” She described her service at KU Hillel and particularly her relationship with her supervisor as an opportunity “to have someone in [her] life who shares the same beliefs and values.” To encourage more critical reflection on her service learning experience, I asked her to examine why Jewish holidays were important to her and why individuals, families, and groups become committed to celebrating them. I suggested that she consult secondary sources that critically evaluate the cultural function of Jewish holiday observance so that she could consider how holiday observances relate to the mission of KU Hillel. I also asked her to illustrate the meaning of citations about service learning from the course syllabus by offering 1-2 specific examples that demonstrate how she participated at KU Hillel in the construction of Jewish identities and that link her experience to particular readings and/or discussions from class.

Book Discussion Final Paper “A”:

This final paper draft was the end result of three earlier short papers and represents an excellent effort at synthesizing the earlier research and analysis and at responding to earlier comments, questions, and suggestions. From an early interest in a broad research topic, i.e., youth protest against the Vietnam War, a social movement that is at the center of the tragedy that ruins the Jewish family in the novel, this student drew on five aptly chosen scholarly essays to formulate an informed and illuminating discussion of a complex historical allegory. Despite the narrowed focus, the final paper still addressed the student’s early interest in studying the novel’s treatment of the transition from the patriotism of the World War II and postwar context to the oppositional politics of dissent that emerged during the era of Civil Rights and the Vietnam War, supported by detailed descriptions of central characters. At the same time, the paper grapples with the definitions, characteristics, and transmission of religious and secular Jewish identities and of the relationships between Jewish and American nationalist identification. The paper is

well written and demonstrates the student's ability to make apt selection and use of secondary sources in the context of an original argument.

Book Discussion Final Paper "D":

This final paper was the end result of three earlier short papers and represents a poor effort at responding to earlier comments, questions, and suggestions. The paper demonstrates the student's difficulty sustaining and supporting an argument about interpersonal family dynamics. The writer does not make apt selections of secondary source material, deploy them to support a coherent argument, or appropriately cite the sources. Nor does the paper link the narrative of the Jewish American family treated in this novel to the broad themes and issues studied in the course, such as immigration, assimilation, secularization, etc. Without a persuasive or lively argument or set of observations about the text, the flaws in the paper, from poor sentences to weak argumentation, are more prominent and difficult to forgive.

III. Reflections

More on plans for next time (link)

Class discussions and essay questions on the final exam revealed that students were curious about two key questions about Jewish experience and identity. They wanted to know more about the history of Jewish citizenship in the United States and elsewhere and about the difference between religious and secular Jewish identity. These are rich areas that I am enthusiastic about highlighting in the future.

Thoughts on the service learning option (link)

The opportunities and organization of service learning for this class were designed in collaboration with the Center for Service Learning. [About half the students in the course chose the service learning option and wrote papers discussing their community-based learning in the context of the coursework. The writing assignments guided them to describe their service learning environment and project, to analyze an aspect or event in their experience that they found meaningful in the context of our studies of Jewish identity-formation, and to relate their community-service experience to materials read and discussed in class. I plan to work further with community participants to enhance student learning as well as the value of student service to the community.]