

# Intergenerational Bonds: Millennials Write Life Stories About the “Greatest Generation”

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What happens when a twittering, texting, gaming, and googling college student meets an octogenarian that personally shaped and created the America we know today? Simply stated, both worlds change. When today’s student of the “Millennial Generation” writes the life story of a community elder from the “Greatest Generation,” a unique and far-reaching relationship develops between the two parties as a snapshot of one person’s life becomes an historical artifact for generations to come. The members of the “Greatest Generation” came of age during the Great Depression and WWII, when *Whirlpool* washing machines were a hot new commodity for housewives and wartime letters to loved ones could take weeks to receive (Brokaw). The students of the “Millennial” population are today’s “net-generation,” born since 1981 and thriving in a collaborative existence that is dependent upon technologies they have had available to them since birth. By connecting the two generations through the experiential educational opportunities provided by service-learning, the relations between our academic and local communities are strengthened and lives are changed for the better.

## Service as the Conduit

For me, the notion of service immediately comes to mind when seeking opportunities for my advanced composition college students to explore literacy in non-academic settings. The benefits of service-learning projects in the classroom have been documented widely. In one report where students participated in service-learning, benefits included “‘deep approaches’ to learning . . . integrating ideas and diverse perspectives, discussing ideas with faculty and peers outside of class, analyzing and synthesizing ideas, applying theories, judging the value of information, [including their] own views and trying to understand others’ perspectives” (Brownell and Swaner 26). Indeed, the cognitive skills involved in this type of learning are complex and seemingly endless for study.

Unlike others who conduct “considerable research to learn from those pioneers who had gone before” (Hutchinson 429), I first learned about using service-learning in the classroom through a faculty workshop. Our institution’s community service center, called the “Volunteer Connection,” defines service-learning as follows: “...an exciting teaching strategy that enriches the curriculum by combining meaningful community service with academic learning. Service-learning provides ‘real-life’ experiences by linking students with local communities and service providers. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning” (*Volunteer Connection* 4). After learning about the opportunities for service-learning in the faculty workshop, I immediately contacted the workshop presenters for community connections. I clearly share in the common qualities of faculty members who try service-learning in their courses: “a willingness to try something new and ambiguous and an interest in solving a pedagogical problem (want[ing] to help motivate students or help them connect their learning to what they [are] going to encounter in real life)” (“Service” 1). Working with the “Volunteer Connection,” I was quickly amazed at just how many literacy-related opportunities there were in our local community. The “Volunteer Connection” representatives were fully supportive of my ambitions and encouraged my pursuits. The

hardest part in starting was narrowing the various opportunities to only three specific community groups.

While the coordination and implementation of three concurrent service-learning projects during one semester were challenging, the outcomes from the college student affiliations with the organizations have been immensely rewarding in ways that continue to reveal themselves. To further the understanding of what service-learning is about, D'Acquisto quotes the "Learn and Serve America" definition of service-learning: "Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" (22). She further explains, "by linking colleges and students with the outside community, service learning programs can literally change lives" (22). In the case of my class project, the notion that a writing experience that can change the lives of those involved goes well beyond the student and the elder to the much larger impact of that pairing. The positive impact from their union affects the student, the writing class, the department, the college or university, as well as the elder, peers within the elder's living community and their immediate family and friends, for generations to come.

### Bridging to the Course Curriculum

The course I targeted for the service-learning projects is described as "Specialized Professional Writing." It allows for "advanced study and practice of writing in selected areas. Variable content may include technical and scientific writing, proposal writing, government report writing, and administrative writing" (*Graduate Catalog*). In my course design and curriculum, I included assignments that were drawn from civic, technical/scientific, and professional communication environments, with the service-learning components falling under the category of civic writing engagements.

While the community coordinator initially called the "Volunteer Connection" for student writers, my goals went beyond their request for an autobiographical sketch of the

elders. A major goal of incorporating the life story service-learning experience in my advanced writing class was to nurture a powerful connection between the student and the elder when tasked with co-authoring the elder's story. Specifically, my goals were to:

- Reach across generational borders to strengthen inter-generational understanding through storytelling and writing of life stories;
- Cross lines to allow college students to enter the world of the elderly to change misperceptions of the gerontologic public toward college students, & vice versa;
- Extend the footprint of student writing beyond the classroom, resulting in permanent historical keepsakes that families treasure forever; and,
- Learn and understand the fundamental practices and pitfalls in conducting a service-learning project in our community.

### The Process and Its Impact

The thirteen students were given the option to choose among three different service-learning projects; over time, they identified themselves by colors, i.e., the "Blue Team." There were four students who chose the life story project and they were referred to as the "Blue Team." The community coordinator at the local retirement/nursing facility selected the elders that could participate in the interview and writing process. Then, the coordinator and I matched the student to the elder based on various considerations (male/female, introvert/extrovert, etc.). There was only one elder matched with each student. Numerous security clearance and permission formalities were dealt with for the students to enter the community facility. These points will be addressed in the "Lessons Learned" section.

The students arrived in the oral interview setting already adept at using any and all necessary technology. Some of the students tape-recorded every meeting so they could repeat what the elder said to get it "exactly right." These taped interviews

were oral histories, with oral history defined as a “compilation of historical data through interviews, usually tape-recorded and sometimes videotaped, with participants in, or observers of, significant events or times. Primitive societies have long relied on oral tradition to preserve a record of the past in the absence of written histories (“Oral History”).

Different software programs were used to publish the stories, and the computer classroom where the class was conducted provided basic word processing tools. Students were allowed to choose their publication software based on their skills and experience with the programs. Two students used *Microsoft Word*, while one used *Indesign* by *Adobe* and another used *Microsoft Publisher*. Alternate forms of the life stories were provided by three of the four students: two provided their stories on DVDs, while one recorded his for the family to have on audiotape. Providing permanence through technologies like DVDs and audiotape versions of the life stories ensures long-lasting family keepsakes.

In terms of time allocation and the writing process, time must be scheduled for extensive proofing and editing of the student texts after each meeting with the elders. The students quickly learned the unique difficulties posed when working with an elder whose memory of events changes each time they meet to write and revise the text. They learned to employ memory ticklers through questions about what happened, where it happened, and other things that went on during the time of the event to help the elder clarify their impressions when recounting story elements.

Significant time must also be provided toward the end of the project for critiquing the students’ texts in-class before the final copy is released. This can be a very exciting time for the entire class. The writers are eager for feedback on their texts and appreciate their closeness to the completion of a semester-long project. The class reviewers are often amazed by their peers’ texts and their moving details, yet peer critique workshops allow them to suggest ways to improve the flow or structure of particular passages. For the class as a whole, the emotional impact of the life stories is felt the most during this stage of the

writing process. The class generally felt that it “really made a difference in the lives of these people and their families”, and the identity of the “team” of four students who wrote the life stories is one that they carry with them after the class is over. When following up with me via email long after the semester ended, one such team member asked if I still had service-learning projects in my writing classes and then commented, “I hope that [they] gain the same things the BLUE team did” (Langan). Again, the “Blue Team” conducted the life story project and it is apparent this student still identifies with the team and what they learned through their community engagement.

## Lessons Learned

### *Address concerns of student naysayers and perceptions of “forced volunteerism.”*

In his book, *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time*, Paul Loeb reflects on those who participate in community service people whose actions that “may inspire people to rethink their values and choices, raise questions they’d kept to themselves, [and] move from silence and accommodation to engagement” (328). He further suggests that “we can also count it as a victory each time we bring new participants into a culture of commitment” (329). Months after the life story project ended, Loeb presented a speech at our university. Following his presentation, I encountered him informally and asked him to comment on the aberrant naysayer in the classroom who feels the assignment is a form of “forced volunteerism.” He said to be sure to advertise the service component clearly in the course description and other registration materials so students are not surprised by the element once they are in the classroom. He also encouraged full disclosure in the course materials, including the syllabus, so the expectations are stated in the course documents from the first day. Finally, he suggested preparing an alternative credit-bearing assignment in the event that there is someone who objects to the community engagement aspect of their learning experience in the class.

I find his comments to be particularly insightful and

timely today within the context of our country's renewed initiative toward service and volunteerism under the Obama administration. When I hear the varied, and often spirited, public reactions to the different volunteer directives, I am reminded of the student naysayer in my class. At first, I was startled to hear her lament, but later found emotional balance in the large numbers of college students who have participated in service and charitable opportunities before entering college. I recognized that I didn't publicize the service components through the registration documents, and that alone could have allowed that particular student to reconsider registering for my section due to the service-learning element. There are numerous other administrative details to be aware of, as well, to ensure the experience is successful.

***Gain security clearances and permission forms for entrance to retirement/nursing homes.***

Close adherence to and understanding of the various administrative tasks inherent in a service-learning project are very important for all involved parties. When students are asked to enter the "homes" of elders living in retirement and nursing facilities, both the student and the elder must be made aware of the facility's rules and regulations governing their new relationship and their visits. The community coordinator, mediating the relationship between their organization and the educational institution, serves as the bridge between the facility and the student visitor. The first day the coordinator visited my class, she brought all the appropriate paperwork and permission forms necessary for the students to fill out and sign so they could regularly visit and park at the facility. The coordinator also identified any special needs of the elder, in terms of best time of day for visits, constraints on communication (hearing loss, vision impairments, etc.), and other relevant information the students would benefit from before their first meeting with the elder.

***Allow time, both in-class and out, to collaborate on issues and allow for meetings with the elders and the community coordinator.***

Working closely with the community coordinator before, during, and after the project to anticipate and remove obstacles and misunderstandings will eliminate some, but not all, of the challenges ahead. Imagine this setting: An elderly gentleman sits quietly in his room, anticipating the young college student's arrival at 1:00. He feels a little anxious about the thought of talking about his life to a stranger, but realizes it is such a treat to have a visitor come to see him that day. "If nothing else," he thinks, "I can hitch a ride with him to Wal-Mart and maybe buy the kid some lunch."

One student faced the scenario, and it provided the foundation for a lively class discussion. The student raised the issue after the event occurred and felt uncomfortable about it because he was instructed not to take the elder outside the facility. The elder was able to get around comfortably, but he was not allowed to drive. While the student did not take the gentleman shopping at Wal-Mart, he did agree to go to lunch with him off-site. While the "damage was done" by the time the student confessed to the class (and me) about the deed, it allowed the class to expose and explore some of the more awkward situations that can arise from the student-elder relationship.

When I contacted the community coordinator about the violation, she appreciated our honesty about the situation and expressed displeasure with the rule violation since the regulations are to protect the elders and ensure their safety. At the same time, she felt the benefits gained in this particular circumstance outweighed the severity of the violation. I have consistently assumed a more stringent stance on this type of situation since then. My mind raced through all sorts of "what if" scenarios and I simply could not let this type of event happen again. Clearly, it was unfair for the student to be taken advantage of by the elder. Furthermore, the safety and security of the elder were put in jeopardy, as well. In the actual student-elder situation, more off-site visits occurred after my class was over, and a strong personal

relationship evolved between them as a result of their ongoing lunch dates in town (with full permission from the family and facility, of course).

***Provide sharing opportunities before, during, and after the project to reflect on the experience in-class, with campus Service-Learning coordinators, community organization coordinators, and, when possible, the elders.***

The “Millennial” had to learn to adapt to the needs of the elder since most of the elders were not able to use email or computers, and some were hard-of-hearing and could not use the phone with ease. Impaired hearing and vision (written drafts of the stories were given to elders in very large font sizes) and confusion surrounding past events were all regular frustrations shared by the elder and the student writer. Even in the final draft stages of the life stories, when a family member reviewed the story, they often wanted to make changes or “corrections” to their parent’s (or family member’s) memory of the event. The students discussed text ownership and brought these issues to the classroom for the class to resolve (and they quickly decided to leave the stories as the elder remembered them, not as interpreted by the family members).

This experience illuminated class discussions on “invention” in the writing process and the importance of rhetorical invention as a social act (LeFevre 1). LeFevre notes that invention becomes “an act that may involve speaking and writing and that at times involves more than one person . . . an act initiated by writers and completed by readers, extending over time through a series of transactions and texts (1). Such is the case when elders tell their life stories verbally to students who capture them in writing.

At the beginning and end of the project, the community coordinator visited our class to discuss issues, as well as successes encountered. This interaction served the students well, and they perceived the coordinator as a liaison to the community member. The students would email her when they felt the need to discuss issues with her throughout the project. Additionally, I kept close contact with the campus coordinators so that they would have a

full understanding of the projects my students were undertaking and ample room to display their accomplishments at the year-end celebration in their honor. We had hoped to have one or more of the elders or their family members come to the class and the year-end event to express their feelings about the experience, but, unfortunately, this was not feasible. Instead, we collected feedback from some family members on an informal basis to glean their general reactions to the experience.

***Coordinate/participate in a public recognition ceremony near completion of the project, and continue the footprint of the students’ work afterwards.***

Our service-learning campus coordinators fully embrace the public acknowledgment of our students’ work. For the past five years, at the end of the spring semester, the students have been honored through a ceremony that includes breakfast, awards for service, public displays of their work, student comments about their experiences, and attendance by the community coordinators, as well as the highest administrators of our university. The president of the university personally addresses their work.

I have presented at a conference on this project and promoted the student’s texts, as well as the “Volunteer Connection’s” services, giving out their buttons, pens, and mini-flashlights to attendees in order to further their remembrance of my students’ efforts. In writing this article, my hope is to reach even more eyes and ears to illuminate my experience and the work my students accomplished with our community members and the positive outcomes shared by all. I have talked to our university media relations director, as well, to see if there would be interest in my students’ accomplishments in the local newspaper or an opportunity for recognition on the local TV news. Faculty members must be devoted to advocating on behalf of their students. Persistent outreach done on their behalf will provide better chances of getting the public recognition they deserve. The recognition serves the students, the community group they work with, and the healthy relationship between the community and the educational institution.

## Impact on the “Millennial”

### *Saying Goodbye*

Today’s busy, always connected “Millennial” students often feel they do not have the time to spend with an elder from the community when first approached with the opportunity, but just four months later, they find themselves struggling to say “goodbye” when the project ends. The lack of connection they face is an emotionally raw dilemma for them. They know they cannot connect with the elder via email or on *Facebook*, or even on the phone, in many cases. Some continue to visit their new friend and mentor, while others write letters the “old-fashioned way” to the elder. I have enjoyed hearing from some of my students about their continued interactions with the elders. Some enjoy writing personal letters on traditional stationery to their new friends in the retirement/nursing community long after the student has graduated and left the area. The students and elders continue to share the stories of their lives with each other, both parties learning much in these special yet, sadly, short-term exchanges. In some cases, the passing of the elder presents a new circle of friendship to the family when the student reaches out to them in their time of grief. Students have told me that the elder’s impact on their lives was deeply personal and yet, at times, it could be seen outwardly, as well.

### *Career Redirection*

One of the four students who wrote a life story graduated immediately following the semester and promptly obtained a corporate position. A year later, she requested a letter of recommendation from me for a position as a Volunteer Coordinator for AmeriCorps. The position involved building literacy skills in children. She attributes her shift from the corporate environment to one linked directly to service, in part, to the service-learning work she did in my class. She wrote, “I am going to start volunteering at Good Shepherd to continue to write Life Stories. I thought you should know [that] was my favorite writing experience throughout my English studies” (Langan). It was very exciting for me to see a student who

was already successful in corporate America decide to shift to a career area that she felt was more rewarding and one that tied her directly to literacy-related service. Furthermore, I was thrilled to discover that she was also soliciting a volunteer opportunity within the same retirement community to continue with the residents’ life stories. This single service-learning assignment in a college English class helped shape and change her perspective of herself in the world, both as a career woman and as a community member. She might very well become one of the engaged Americans targeted in “The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act” which reauthorizes the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 and creates several new community-service programs aimed at engaging school-age children. The Act aims to more than triple the number of Americans serving in AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps-like programs from 75,000 to 250,000 by 2017 (Zehr 8).

### *Common Ground*

Another student writer found strong bonds with her elder as their stories of life and war intertwined. The student, a veteran of the Gulf War, quickly identified with the tales from WWII that her elder illuminated throughout their visits. She often commented in class on the recurrent memories shared by the 80-something-year-old and her own memories from war. She was amazed that many of the same challenges before, during and after serving their country were the same today as they were back then. Whether reliving the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor or the bombing of Baghdad, the two women found their stories blending into one. Generational differences evaporated as similarities about wartime experiences arose, even when the wars they participated in existed 50 years apart.

In class, the student explored the conflicting nature of her identity in the role of interviewer while finding the elder’s responses to be the same as hers. These observations led to robust class discussions on the formation of a writer’s persona as the writer seeks and creates text, simultaneously. Borrowing from relevant research, Alan Wong highlights the observation

of Riordan as follows: “. . . this ostensibly simple endeavor [of conducting an oral history interview] was actually much more complex than he had originally imagined, as challenging issues revolving around power, authority, and subjectivity suddenly emerged” (240). Wong, commenting on readings from Michael Riordan’s book, *An Unauthorized Autobiography of the World: Oral History on the Front Lines* (2004), suggests the need for oral historians to improve their ability to be self-reflexive and relate better to their interviewees (Abstract). He wishes the interviewer would undergo a storytelling experience, as well, to gain insights into the interviewee’s experience. This is precisely what was happening to the student writer who was simultaneously experiencing the war story of the interviewee. These insights were invaluable in the class discussion on the collection of oral histories and their implications for the interviewers and interviewees.

## Impact on the Elder

### *Not Wanting to Say Goodbye*

The elders felt a different kind of loss when the project drew to a close. The student visitor was someone who entered their somewhat isolated lives, if only for an hour at a time, and listened attentively to stories about their lives. The connections they shared were intimate and captured for all time. Many were saddened when the stories were completed and delivered to them because it meant there would be no more regularly scheduled meeting times to share with their young confidants. Even though many of the pairs continued to communicate after the project, ongoing and long-term involvement ceased. Their personal story, however, remains to be shared and told throughout the years. As Gourley observes, “like monuments and memorials, oral histories are created so people will remember and understand the history of their nation, their people, their culture. And like public monuments, oral histories are often on display. Many towns and cities have collected oral histories in public and university libraries, historical societies, and museums. Oral history collections are also increasingly available on the Internet” (1).

Ultimately, I would love to see my students’ life stories of the “Greatest Generation” published on a special website for ease of access for the elder’s family and friends.

Even without the pressure of worldwide publication, the elders were motivated to have their stories told accurately and fairly; therefore, they collaborated with the students to ensure their stories were told to their standards. This interaction bonded them to each other in ways neither expected. The story was shared between strangers, yet was actually written for the elder’s family. At the end of the project, one family member commented, “she told stories to the student that none of us had ever heard before and we learned a lot about our family. This is such a timeless treasure for the future generations of our family.”

## Final Thoughts

“For the first time in American history, ‘the old old’ -- those over 85 -- are now the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population” (“Living Old”). What better time to unite the “Millennial” with this history-making population? While organizing, conducting, and evaluating service-learning projects can be daunting, the rewards shared by all far outweigh the challenges that might occur. Furthermore, connecting with community coordinators in unique ways to enrich the writing student’s experience provides a collaboration that moves well beyond the coordinator and instructor to the most important cooperative pairing: the local community members and the students. Schwartzman’s words eloquently summarize the significance:

Critical service-learning, informed by the realization that benefits accrue to all participants, levels the perceived status differences that historically have separated higher education from the surrounding community. Indeed, the people being served also perform their own service. Those who ‘receive’ service educate students who perform unfamiliar tasks and become more sensitive to walks of life and problems they would not normally encounter in the classroom. (Schwartzman 56)

Furthermore, Coleman's and Funk's chapter on "Learning from Public Writing" in *Professional and Public Writing: A Rhetoric and Reader for Advanced Composition* highlights Jimmy Carter's service experience. His period as a citizen, contributing as a volunteer and agent of service to his country, was a more "meaningful period of his life" than his years as president (155-156). This is a powerful validation of the importance of charitable acts in one's life.

Service-learning opportunities like the life story project ignite my passion for teaching by enabling others to recognize the value of writing as a tool that bonds divergent populations for individual, communal, and global empowerment.

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