On the occasion of the inauguration of the
John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement

Engaging Hur: Reflections of a service-learning adventurer
Amani Elshimi, Writing Instructor, Composition and Rhetoric

On a grim and dusty Saturday morning, as street sweepers swished dry leaves into the sewers (and no roosters cuckooed on rooftops), I hopped into my car and drove to campus. Today, my class would receive intensive training in the methodology of teaching literacy – a session, especially arranged by the Office of Student Development, delivered by the Rotary, and attended by sixteen students from my Research Writing class, one TEFL graduate student, myself, and Hur (pronounced *Hoor*).

The training was part of a capsule service-learning project on the theme of "Civic Engagement." The students would then spend two Saturdays at Nekla village, teaching learners at the AUC Village Library. "We can't very well talk about 'civic engagement', seated within a walled classroom," I had told them. And they had moaned.

As we assembled for the workshop, I heard the usual complaints – *Do we have to? Why us? Are the other sections doing this? Is this graded? How long is this going to take? This is a Saturday, you know. I knew something was wrong, the minute I joined this class.* I smiled. As I managed my fifth service-learning adventure, I felt I had finally become attuned to the emotional cycle of students introduced to course-embedded service – confusion, uncertainty, resistance, affected boredom, curiosity, engagement, affected disengagement, affirmation of engagement, uncompromising criticism of project, re-appraisal of personal, academic and social goals, and finally, appreciation of experience.

The term "service-learning," conjoins the acts of "service" and "learning," not as distinct, parallel tracks, but as an integrated, holistic experience which immerses students and teachers in an authentic community context where academic knowledge and skills become instrumental in fulfilling the service outcomes. Eyler and Giles (1999) define the term as:

"a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems and, at the same time, reflect upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves."

I watched the students yawn through the theoretical background of the presentation. *Illiteracy rates are as high as 48%* (yawn).*They may be as high as 70% if we count the dismal levels of literacy up until preparatory school* (yawn). *Any questions?* (yawn).

In came Hur – a student's beautiful two-month old daughter - claiming her midday feed. Hur was joining us on the long Saturdays, promising to be an active and assertive member of the class community. And community it became… *Would Hur be safe in the village? Could she contract Avian Flu? Would there be appropriate nursing space at the library? Wouldn't the day be too long*

for her? The reality of the upcoming village trip suddenly loomed. *Are we really going to teach? How old are the learners? Did AUC students build the library? Where is the village? Can we work in groups?* The emotional cycle was rolling.

As my students worked in teams to plan, create and present language games for the village children, I saw specific course goals materialize – constructive argument, use of audience-appropriate appeals, development of detail, cultivation of credibility. *I should refer later to this concrete experience*, I thought, *to reinforce academic writing*. Hur's head nodded in agreement.

Over lunch, we shared fears and uncertainties, support and reassurance. We bragged of parents involved in community organizations, and service activities we had taken part in at school, mosque, church or club. We told stories of friends who secured jobs at high-ranking oil companies, only to find they had been posted in rural villages and distant areas. *They should teach literacy to the villagers in their free time. If every literate person taught just 2 or 3, illiteracy levels would go down.* They had been listening, after all.

My experience with service learning over the past three years has been challenging, but always greatly rewarding. Listed below are some of the challenges and rewards.

Challenges

- time-consuming
- needs team, time, project and crisis management skills
- may pose difficulty in assessment
- needs departmental support (to modify pre-existing structures)
- may be given an inadequate percentage of the grade
- needs risk tolerance
- may cause concern for student safety

Rewards

- provides an authentic learning context
- raises consciousness on community issues and problems
- allows higher retention of knowledge and skills
- caters to a variety of learning styles
- strengthens teamwork and cooperation
- heightens motivation and enhances self awareness
- improves analytic, evaluative and problem-solving skills
- improves creativity and judgment
- enhances written and oral expression
- redefines role of teacher as facilitator and fellow learner
- integrates student academic and social development
- employs education for the enhancement of community

The newly-established **John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement** promises to centralize, facilitate and help sustain campus efforts that promote community-based pedagogies and service activities. It repositions the institution as an active participant in community development, and empowers faculty and students to engage in community problem-solving, research, service and civic involvement. Its mission statement emphasizes "a dual focus"

"to consolidate university activities aimed at encouraging engaged citizenship and service, and to promote enhanced philanthropic giving in the region."

One of the first projects of the Gerhart Center is the "Campus Literacy Project" – the rebirth of a 1997 student initiative, aimed at promoting literacy amongst the AUC workers. By focusing first on the community within, the Center highlights its vision of social justice, and institutionalizes a culture of responsible citizenship amongst all university stakeholders – students, faculty and staff.

As my students gathered their belongings at the end of that grim Saturday morning, I walked up casually to a fellow who had been visibly resistant at the beginning. "How was it?" I asked. "Eshta*," he replied. "Can I analyze the literacy programs at Nekla for my research paper?" And Hur squealed out in glee.

Eshta is Arabic slang for 'cool!'

References:

Eyler, J., & Giles, D. E. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Note:

Volunteers for the "Campus Literacy Project" may teach either Arabic or English, at beginner or intermediate levels. Training in the methodology of literacy will be given prior to teaching the classes. If interested, contact

The Gerhart Center
Youssef El Guindy,
3rd floor, appt. 33
Ext. 5467