

# A University Without Walls: Connecting the Traditional Classroom to the Community Through Sustainable Service-Learning

Mounir Ben Zid<sup>1</sup> & Azza Al-Kendi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman

Correspondence: Mounir Ben Zid, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman. E-mail: mounir@squ.edu.om

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## Abstract

Many worldwide initiatives demonstrate how education has reoriented to address sustainability, encourage university professors to leave their ivory towers, and connect the traditional classroom to civic development by providing society with services. Significant strides have been made to support and optimize service-learning for several academic disciplines in the humanities. However, the education for sustainable development in literary studies in the English department at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman has remained more a dead letter than a radical shift in education. Since a growing body of research evidence has demonstrated that the pedagogical practices relying on traditional teaching are not always effective in engaging students in active participation in learning, the study promotes a novel educational framework as a learning process whereby the wall between the university and the community is broken down, English literary studies are paired with sustainable service-learning, and knowledge is created through the transformation of students' experiences. Within this framework, the pairing of service-learning and literary studies is an innovative way to teach course concepts, expand students' vision of the society, and empower citizens with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to achieve sustainable development in Oman and set the example for other Gulf countries.

**Keywords:** education, community service, sustainability, service-learning, literature, students with special needs

## 1. Introduction

As higher education institutions come under growing pressure to perform to ever-higher standards despite continued financial cutbacks, the debate on whether university professors must connect traditional classroom practices to civic development has grown in prominence. On the one hand, in "Save the world on your own time," Stanley Fish (2008) encouraged university professors to preserve academic excellence and focus on imparting their disciplinary expertise through classroom-based lectures. Fish contends that academic institutions should not be operated as businesses, and should focus on the provision of "cost-effective" services that address societal needs. On the other hand, in "Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate," Ernest Boyer (1997) advocates for the incorporation of community service and sustainability in academic curricula. Likewise, Carney calls upon academics to foster citizenship and moral development "to pull down the walls dividing the ivory tower from the surrounding communities that could benefit from the practical application of our collective academic knowledge" (p. 230).

Yet, available evidence demonstrates that the pedagogical practices relying on traditional teaching are not always effective in engaging students in participatory learning. According to Annie Murphy Paul, when the traditional lecture format is used "without other instructional supports, [it] offers unfair advantages to an already privileged population" (2015, para. 2). While much has been written on sustainability across various domains, it has received less attention from literary scholarship mainly because sustainability is often discussed in the context of broader issues such as food security, climate change, and environmental protection.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of the "hands-on" and "learning by doing" approach in both research and practice, this educational paradigm has not been sufficiently explored at Sultan Qaboos University (hereafter SQU), one of the leading academic institutions in Oman. As a result, several local stakeholders have criticized the curricular content and pedagogic practices of literature education offered at SQU for failing to impart critical thinking and problem-solving skills to its students, rendering them ill-equipped to act as responsible citizens who could enhance Omani society.

Although the stakeholders' critical arguments are not supported by empirical evidence, they do point to the need to bring sustainable development to the classroom, school, and community. This view is also in keeping with the approach to teaching and learning proposed by UNESCO, which "seeks to empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future" (2002, p. 10).

In this work, sustainable development is not conceptualized as an abstract, unachievable concept, but rather something understandable and doable in a variety of contexts, including education. Nonetheless, it is recognized that several challenges must be overcome to integrate service-learning with literature. In particular, it is crucial that service-learning encourages literary interpretation to fit real-world situations and thus erase their complexities.

In other words, by integrating service-learning into literature courses, academic institutions can provide opportunities for students to develop knowledge about their role in their community and country, as well as the increasingly interconnected world. They will be more motivated to make the world a better place to live and will more readily embrace the role of a change agent against injustice. These skills are beneficial for all responsible citizens, but are particularly valuable for students, as they are still developing a sense of civic responsibility. Upon graduation, they will be ready for meaningful participation in public life, which involves cultivation of critical analysis that is indispensable for addressing pressing community needs.

The service-learning project in focus of this research aims to break the walls between university and society by facilitating the link between the curricular content and social service through the cross-cutting processes of reflection, systematization, and evaluation. Through different teaching strategies, which involve faculty guidance and feedback, students undertake intentional reflection in the action, for the action, and on the action, leading to the progressive construction of competencies.

The service-learning project described here was implemented as a part of a literature course taught in the English Department at SQU with the goal of connecting students' academic work with the real-world situations experienced by their local community. This was a collaborative initiative, involving SQU's Social Service unit serving students with disabilities operating within the College of Arts and Social Sciences. The service-learning component was integrated into course readings and writing assignments.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Genealogy of Sustainability and Sustainable Development

In Oman, as in other countries, the demand for graduate programs in the humanities has experienced a dramatic decline not only due to societal changes and economic pressures but also to the failure of universities and professionals to combat the prevailing view that the humanities are irrelevant to worldly affairs. Against this background, considerable progress has been made at the global level towards enhancing sustainability by incorporating service-learning into the curriculum of many undergraduate and postgraduate programs, including art, communication, English, and philosophy. However, there is a considerable variation in the content of these educational initiatives, partly due to the multiple definitions of sustainable development.

In the context of higher education, sustainability typically refers to the capacity to remain relevant in the ever-changing social and economic landscape, which necessitates investment in teacher knowledge, skills, and practices, and an unwavering commitment to serving students more effectively. For Century and Levy, "Sustainability is the ability of a program to operate on its core beliefs and values and use them to guide essential and inevitable program adaptations over time while maintaining improved outcomes" (2002, p. 4). This definition also aligns with the one provided in the Brundtland report, *Our Common Future*, prepared for the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), which describes sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (p. 43). While sustainable development is often related to environmental issues, in this paper, focus is given to interventions, such as service-learning, that increase the capability of educational institutions to respond to community needs without endangering the future.

### 2.2 The Etiology of Service-Learning

A large number of existing studies in the literature show controversy over the definition of service-learning. While Kathleen Flecky (2011), Adler-Kassner et al. (1997), and Barbara Jacoby (1996) concur that the essence of service-learning "rests on a philosophy of service and learning that occurs in experiences, reflection, and civic engagement within a collaborative relationship involving community partners" (p. 1), Shelley H. Billig (2002) provides a much broader definition, which implies many different interpretations, describing service-learning as "a teaching method that involves students performing community service to learn knowledge and skills connected to curricular objectives" (Billig, p. 184 cited in Griffith and Barth (2006)).

On the one hand, Flecky and Jacoby offer a similar description of service-learning—as an educational approach that integrates service activities with classroom learning and combines "what is being studied or taught in class with a specific activity that meets an identified need in the community, whether this community is within the school compound or outside the school walls" (cited in Griffith & Bard, 2006, p. 57). The authors argue that service-learning initiatives at institutions of higher education typically comprise activities that address a community need and meet specific curricular goals, as well as incorporate opportunities for students to reflect on these curricular connections, preparing them to lead socially responsible and productive lives in a changing world.

Adler-Kassner et al. (1997) concur with Flecky and Jacoby that "service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (p. 5). By the same token, Danika Brown (2001) also defined service-learning as "expanding educational institutions' participation in the community, especially in terms of fostering coalitions and creating responsive resources for and with that community" (p. 5). Similarly, V. A. Howard (1999) argued that the objective of service-learning is "to use community and the humanities and service-learning public service experiences to enhance the significance and impact of traditional courses in the liberal arts and the professions" (p. 128).

In contrast, scholars such as R. Battistoni (1997) opine that service-learning may have different impulses. For example, the philanthropic approach requires the inclusion of a public service component into traditional classroom education to ensure that students consider the impact of service. This perspective is challenged by the civic approach, which assumes that higher education must be radically

transformed to produce responsible citizenship.

With this in mind, the service-learning project described in this paper is based on the latter model because it represents a powerful impulse to develop service-learning pedagogy. This strategy was adopted as the goal was to break with tradition, disrupt the *status quo* in higher education, serve society, and solve social problems. Nevertheless, its primary objective was to motivate students to actively participate in real-world initiatives addressing community needs and reflect on their experiences. This goal was achieved by engaging faculty members in development activities directed at curriculum revision.

### 2.3 The Impact of Service-learning in Higher Education on Students

The ultimate aim of education at any level is to prepare students for the next step in their educational journey, culminating in a successful career. Increasingly, however, students are expected to apply the knowledge and skills gained to actively engage in community projects and serve as leaders in addressing societal issues. To achieve these multi-faceted aims, education must reflect changing trends and demands, while meeting the expectations and needs of diverse students with different capabilities and learning styles. In particular, when designing curricula, focus needs to be placed to a much greater extent on civic responsibility, giving rise to the “service-learning” concept. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) defined service-learning as:

a credit bearing educational experience and a common learning paradigm in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflects on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 5)

This perspective aligns with the views shared by many scholars, pointing to the need to revise educational curricula at all levels to ensure that, by the time students embark on higher education, they are already aware of the benefits of community engagement.

As service-learning is envisaged as “hands-on” pedagogy, Simons and Cleary (2006) purport that it “provides students with an opportunity to learn beyond the bounds of the traditional classroom” (p. 308). Thus, course content that ensures not only valuable academic experience but also incorporates participation in community-led projects helps students appreciate the importance of using their skills and knowledge to improve the living conditions in their communities. This exposure to practical initiatives aimed at addressing pressing societal needs will also enhance their chances of forging successful careers in their chosen field on graduation.

More than a decade ago, Coulter-Kern et al. (2013) conducted a study involving prospective teachers and demonstrated that incorporating service-learning into the curriculum prompts these future educators to reflect on the course content and consider the practical application of the knowledge gained. In an earlier study, Lu and Lambright (2010) advocated for the adoption of service-learning concepts in higher education to prepare college students for the highly uncertain future and ensure that they possess the skills needed to remain agile and adaptable.

As a part of their work, Casile, Hoover, and O’Neil (2011) examined the impact of service-learning courses on higher education students’ attitudes toward community engagement. The authors found that the participating students not only gained better mastery of the academic content but could also more readily see its relevance to their lives and those of their communities. Accordingly, the authors concluded that “service-learning, a pedagogy in which academic instruction and community service are combined with reflection and critical thinking has been shown to help students develop and refine a set of personal values and to engender enduring commitment to the community” (p. 3).

While concurring with these assertions, Gross and Maloney (2012) focused on the capacity of service-learning projects to enhance students’ communication and attentive listening skills. The authors purported that, as students engage in community-based projects, they need to be able to liaise with diverse stakeholders and ensure that their ideas are correctly interpreted and implemented while providing suggestions respectfully and constructively. Peterson et al. (2014) also found numerous benefits of service-learning pedagogy, emphasizing that this approach to education provides an ideal opportunity to link course content with the tasks students will be expected to perform at the workplace.

As a result, Hébert and Hauf (2015), Sedlak et al. (2003), and others argue that college and university students need service-learning courses to enable them to utilize the skills they gained during their educational journey to address immediate societal needs as well as recognize civic issues that will require decisive leadership in the future.

### 2.4 Reframing Literature Education at SQU: From Homework to Real Work

Education for sustainable development is relevant not only to those teaching in disciplines such as biology, geography, and engineering, but also includes humanities fields such as English literature. While research in this domain is still relatively limited, a growing body of evidence points to the benefits of pairing service-learning with literature courses. Indeed, several scholars concur that education for sustainable development can be incorporated into English literature curricula. For example, Ellen Cushman (1999) suggested that literary specialists can “link the love of art and human decency” with the appreciation for one’s larger community (p. 335). Cushman also maintains that literature and textual interpretation “can be powerfully instructive when it comes time to understand the conflicts taking place in students’ and community residents’ daily lives” (p. 330).

Like other higher education institutions worldwide, SQU is looking for ways to incorporate the service component into its educational programs at different levels, given that this is recognized as a valuable strategy to accomplish its vision and mission while contributing to

sustainable development in Oman. This commitment is reflected in the SQU's mission statement and the different ways in which service scholarship is presented as a means to enhance student learning.

When formulating the SQU 2016–2040 strategic plan and vision of education, the university's leadership sought to address the emerging societal challenges by embedding new values and practices in its mission and core objectives. In redefining the role of education in the society and national economy, SQU aims to serve as an example for other universities in the Gulf region on how to contribute to sustainable development via their educational systems. According to His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Al Said, the educational system in Oman should

...develop human resources possessing the necessary work and life skills to be productive in a knowledge-based world, able to adapt to changes, preserve national identity and its inherent values, and contribute to the advancement of human civilization.  
(cited in SQU Strategic Plan, 2015, p. 3)

Given that this speech was delivered at the Council of Oman in 2012, considerable progress has already been made at SQU to implement His Majesty's vision in practice. The university's mission always was and still is to excel in teaching and learning, research and innovation, and community service. The faculty and other SQU employees contribute to this endeavor by "promoting the principles of scientific analysis and creative thinking in a collegial and stimulating environment" and by participating "in the production, development, and dissemination of knowledge and interact with national and international communities" (cited in SQU Strategic Plan, 2015, p. 3).

Within this framework, and given the new educational demands and the rapidly changing global academic environment, community service has emerged as the core function of education at SQU. This is evident from the SQU Strategic Plan, which states that the university's main mission is to meet the challenges of a knowledge-based economy by "producing graduates, conducting research, and serving society, thereby contributing to Oman's economic and social development" (p. 11). To ensure the realization of SQU's vision, the primary purpose of education is "to equip students with skills and knowledge for success in life, in the workplace, in society, and in their personal lives" (p. 21).

In the domain of research, the university's goal is to

go beyond basic research and knowledge generation by expanding its applied research to address social, cultural, economic, and industrial issues in Oman and the region ... to play an active role in addressing various community needs [and maintain] an educational environment that encourages leadership, decision making, critical thinking, creativity, and innovation (cited in SQU Strategic Plan, 2015, p. 3).

Yet despite the burgeoning growth and unprecedented popularity of service-learning pedagogical approaches across all areas of education, and despite changes in awareness, student values, and an increasing interest in social responsibility, instructors of the British survey courses (ENGL 4219) in the English Department at SQU have shown little interest in adopting this educational model. They have also made little progress in integrating sustainable development into their literature curricula and methodologies, fostering necessary capabilities and skills, and developing meaningful courses on sustainability.

To address this issue and increase the participation of the English Department faculty in the initiatives supporting the SQU vision, the authors of the present study purport to argue that academic content should first be integrated with community work that brings meaning and value to both students and members of the service organization. The premise behind this proposal is that a practical service-learning course would provide students with opportunities to apply important theoretical content to identify community issues, engage in community service, and better understand how to create sustainable community change, thus increasing their self-esteem.

This educational model would require that the faculty assume less authority while encouraging students to embrace real-life responsibilities and challenging tasks and make critical decisions for their service-learning projects. In addition, service-learning courses at SQU must also involve reciprocity, reflection, and moral imperatives such as civic engagement. As noted by Eyler and Giles (1999), in the reflection stage, the academic study is designed to provide an in-depth understanding of social problems. Finally, to gain the most from service-learning, faculty must communicate with students about the importance of moral values.

### 3. The Service-learning Project

To incorporate sustainable development into the educational processes and practices at SQU, it is not necessary to create a new course in the curriculum. Instead, parts of the academic content of existing courses can be integrated into a specific activity aimed at addressing an identified community need. This strategy was adopted for the project in focus of this investigation, whereby a new concept was introduced in a literature course to support the service-learning experience. To accomplish the objectives of sustainability through this literature course, a good service-learning program had to follow a specific format and systematic steps, which necessitated a detailed plan. The general guidelines for this service-learning project went through five different but interrelated stages, commencing with "investigation," as a part of which the needs of the students with special needs at SQU were identified in collaboration with the staff working with these students.

In the second stage—denoted as "preparation and planning"—students enrolled in the British Survey III course were introduced to the community issue, familiarized with the project, and prepared to take on the service project.

The third stage included taking action, which required that students link their classroom curricular content to the actual service work benefiting students with special needs. Upon completion of the community engagement, students wrote reflective essays. In this final stage of the

service-learning project, students reflected on their service-learning experience, concept development, and their role in affecting social change within both their local setting and the larger context of their academic and social environment.

Once the course syllabus was finalized and the service-learning task was presented in the spring semester of 2023, the participating students read two British romantic poems on disability by William Wordsworth, entitled “The Idiot Boy” and “The Blind Highland Boy.”

After exposing students to selected readings on the theory, practice, principles, and aims of service-learning through readings such as Lesley Wheeler’s article “On capstones, service-learning, and poetry” (2010), we discussed with them the work they are expected to do to help students with special needs, thus raising their awareness of the role society should play in supporting all its citizens.

#### 4. Methodology

We discussed with students how, in a typical British educational setting, the two poems “The idiot Boy” and “The Blind Highland Boy” are examined through the lens of disability theory, and how applying a disability reading to both poems allows for a reconsideration of Johnny as an individual with his own voice and agency. Inspired by such a native perspective of the poems to capture students’ service-learning experience, we adopted a qualitative methodology, which involved analysis of data gathered via semi-structured interviews and reflection reports. The students were interviewed individually, allowing them to share their experiences in their own words, which was essential for understanding their perceptions of the project as well as their attitudes towards people with special needs. The interviews were transcribed and coded to facilitate thematic analysis.

The participants in this study consisted of seven English major students enrolled in the British Survey III course in the Fall semester of 2023. The students were between 20 and 22 years old and were in their fourth year of undergraduate studies.

#### 5. Discussion of Findings

When analyzing the students’ answers to the interview questions, we categorized them into personal outcomes, academic and intellectual outcomes, and social and community engagement outcomes, as this approach was adopted in extant research on service-learning. The “personal outcomes” category comprised positive changes in self-awareness, self-esteem, tolerance, leadership, and moral development. When considering “academic and intellectual outcomes,” focus was given to the achievement of curricular objectives and increased commitment to education. Finally, the “social and community engagement” category included relevant social outcomes such as interpersonal skills and self-confidence, as well as increased civic engagement.

As students worked with different individuals and engaged in diverse experiences, the depth and complexity of reported outcomes also varied. However, most of the outcomes were similar, as discussed below.

##### 5.1 Personal Outcomes

As several students had some prior experience in dealing with people with disabilities, while others did not, this affected the nature of their involvement in this project. One of the students (AR0), who had no prior exposure to blind people, noted that this project raised her awareness about their needs. She said:

*I’ve always had a curiosity about how they live because we normally do things without noticing how we do them. I’ve been thinking how they make their scarves, especially girls...they cannot see themselves in the mirror and cannot check their dress.*

On the other hand, AR0 shared that, as her brother has Down’s syndrome, growing up with him has made her very sensitive to the discrimination people with disabilities often face. She explained:

*I came to realize that in our society we still have very limited information about what is a disability. I think we are all disabled in one way or another. We keep pointing out other people’s disabilities because they are more visible than ours. I think this experience has made me see the difference between those people’s disability and our community in general at some point how ignorant we are.*

MA0, who reported having no prior experience with people with disabilities, indicated that, contrary to his expectations, he did not find any difference between healthy and blind people. When asked about how this experience has changed his self-awareness, MA0 said:

*I don’t see them different from us. However, they don’t like it when you treat them like they are blind...they already know everything. In the disability center, I was ignorant about many things; for example, the machines they use are very advanced.*

MA0 also mentioned that this experience has changed his self-esteem. When asked to elaborate, he explained that he was able to see that, despite his disability, the blind student he worked with “was so alive...like he was very passionate about life. I felt like I was worried about trivial matters in life.”

LA0 stated that one of the personal outcomes she gained from this experience was a change in her perceptions and opinions about blind people, whom she previously considered different and difficult to deal with. She now considers them:

*similar to us, there is nothing different but we have to deal with them well, we have to help them, and we are responsible for them. That’s our social responsibility. We have to guide them, and we should not be ashamed of them, we should respect them...not cheat them because they are blind.*

Similarly, AA0 confirmed in her reflection essay that the project was a life-transforming experience, as “dealing with a blind student stands out as particularly transforming and humbling, challenging my perceptions, broadening my empathy, and deepening my

*understanding for the endurance of the human spirit.”*

All participating students agreed that they no longer viewed blind students as having special needs but rather as unique individuals with the same traits and characteristics as any healthy person.

### 5.2 Academic and Intellectual Outcomes

All participating students agreed that their experience in this project has made the assigned reading material much more meaningful. For example, SA0 stated:

*When I read Wordsworth's work, it was very surprising, actually, how the point of view of society [towards disabled people] is still the same despite differences in era, geography, and time...a lot of people still have the same view towards people with disability. In that era, people were ignorant, they were excused. But, nowadays, even though we have advanced technology, and people are educated, we still have the same mentality towards disability. Now it makes more sense.*

MA0 also thought that it was beneficial to read and discuss in-class literature that was related to the service-learning project. For instance, he appreciated that William Wordsworth called for inclusive learning, which is one of the SQU aims. He stated, “*They [the blind students] weren't in separate classrooms. Also, they don't get that special treatment because they are disabled. They are mainly like us.*”

LA0 also found similarities between the poems and her project experience. For example, she mentioned that one of the themes that poets discussed in their poems was shame due to having a blind relative. She said:

*I joined the blind student at a coffee shop on campus. The blind student told me that the lady who was ordering coffee in front of us was her relative; she recognized her from her voice. The lady saw her blind relative but decided to pretend not to know her and just ignored her.*

### 5.3 Social and Community Engagement Outcomes

All students had a very positive view of individuals with disabilities, and these attitudes were only strengthened through participation in the service-learning project. However, they also acknowledged that blind people are still looked down upon in many contexts, and felt that it was their responsibility to raise social and civic awareness of the need for a more inclusive society. Some of the students narrated different stories shared by the blind students that reflected the negative attitudes they faced in their lives. When asked whether they would be willing to engage in future campaigns to raise awareness about this issue, they all exhibited enthusiasm. BA0 stated in her reflection essay that “*service-learning helps students to be part of the community and apply what they have learned in their courses in real-life experience.*”

The students also felt that this experience has helped them establish partnerships with the disability unit at SQU in general and the community of visually impaired students in particular. Their answers indicated that the participants seemed to understand the needs, concerns, and aspirations of their fellow students with special needs at SQU. As noted by RA0 in her reflection paper, “*It developed a sense of social responsibility in me, as I started to think of more ways and methods to include people with special needs in our everyday life.*”

### 5.4 Challenges and Limitations

Even though all participants provided positive feedback on the service-learning experience in terms of personal development, academic and intellectual development, and social and community engagement awareness, some challenges were also mentioned. For example, the participants mentioned that it was sometimes hard to find suitable time to meet with their partners with special needs due to differences in schedules. Another limitation the participants reported was the limited time they had to complete the service-learning project. They thought that five hours were not sufficient for them to get fully engaged with their partners with special needs and to fully benefit from the experience. Some of the participants also reported some challenges in dealing with their special needs partners. This is because they found that they had to be extra cautious with the way they talked to them and the topics they discussed with them.

Building on the challenges mentioned earlier, the implementation of the service-learning project also encountered difficulties.

Encouraging student participation was particularly challenging, as many were hesitant to join due to the unfamiliarity of the project and the additional workload it required as part of their assessment. Additionally, coordinating free time slots for both the participants and the students with special needs proved challenging. These students were occupied with lectures and other coursework, making it difficult to find mutually convenient times to meet and complete the service-learning project.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In a nutshell, the study stressed the idea that when service-learning is incorporated into English literary studies, it is necessary to adopt a new pedagogy to enhance and deepen the student's learning experience to ensure that they embrace social responsibility and citizenry and are willing to address the needs of their community. The study additionally concluded that service-learning projects also provide a unique opportunity for students to grow as community leaders who are capable of utilizing their unique skill sets for the greater good. While literature cannot provide solutions to complex social problems, as was shown in this work, it can certainly present them in a way that makes them more relatable. As noted by Conville (2001), by combining community service with classroom activities, educators can ensure that “our students enlarge their vision of the society they want to live in beyond the society they already live in” (p. 185).

For those aiming to adopt similar initiatives at their academic institutions, the study shows that the experience is highly beneficial for all

involved. This view also aligns with the perspective shared by Rabkin (1990), who opined that a new vision of literature as “performative social action...and work, not homework” is needed (p. 200) to promote an authentic learning experience through service-learning and involve students in meaningful thinking, writing, and reflection. As Laurie Grobman and Roberta Rosenberg wrote, “In our view, service-learning provides extraordinary opportunities to enact literary study as both real work and performative social action – to alter the focus, as Smith suggests, from what literary study is to what it may do” (2015, p. 5).

Nevertheless, the study underscored the importance of implementing service-learning projects as a part of literature courses, while keeping literature at the core and resisting any insidious tendency in service-learning toward “interpretations of literature to fit or explain real-world situations...thereby erasing the complexities of literary interpretation [as if texts] are valuable only as sociological documents, not as works of art” (Grobman and Rosenberg, p. 130).

In addition to the funds and support offered by Sultan Qaboos University and the initiatives taken by some scholars to pair literary studies with service-learning, the study recommends and encourages other faculty members in the humanities in Oman and the Gulf region to conduct further research, adopt this approach, use a wider sample of students, and integrate similar service-learning initiatives for future academic research.

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#### **Authors' contributions**

Dr. Mounir Ben Zid was responsible for study design and revision. Dr. Azza Al-Kendi was responsible for data collection. Dr. Mounir Ben Zid and Dr. Azza Al-Kendi drafted and revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. Both authors contributed equally to the study.

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## Appendix

### A Sample Student Report

“Pairing English Romantic Poetry with Service Learning: Vice or Virtue?” by Maryam Nawaf Saleh Al-Dhahab ID: 130935

As a literature student, I frequently discover intriguing connections between literature and reality, which helps me understand new aspects of the human experience. Similarly, our instructor in the British Survey class introduced us to the idea of combining analysis of British romantic poetry with service learning. It is widely known that literature, especially English romantic poetry, serves as a valuable basis for the discussion and reflection on real-world issues. Reading these poems may inspire people, especially literature students, to engage with the community, making them more appreciative of its diversity and rendering them more empathetic toward different members of society.

According to Essaka Joshua<sup>[37]</sup>, the writers and poets of the Romantic era aimed to convey to their readers that differences in appearance and social status do not correspond to levels of attractiveness and capability. Like the Romantic writer Frances Burney, who suggests in *Camilla* that deformity's negative connotations are simply cultural, in “A Defense of Poetry”, the poet Percy Shelley suggests that something that is deformed can be beautiful. Similarly, as noted by Zoe Beenstock<sup>[38]</sup>, the William Wordsworth's poems “The Idiot Boy” and “The Blind Highland Boy” aim to portray disability as something that should not be frowned upon, promoting empathy towards people with special needs.

Hence, when Romantic poetry is paired with service learning it can become an effective tool for promoting community involvement and inspiring improvements in our society. To demonstrate the utility of such an initiative in practice, as a part of our British Survey class, students were encouraged to use the aforementioned two poems and additional readings as an inspiration for community service at the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) Disability Center, where our task involved assisting students with special needs in learning the English language. In this reflective essay, I will explore this experience along with its advantages and drawbacks.

Upon arriving at the SQU's Disability Center, I was first given a tour of the premises and was introduced to the special tools and electronic devices used by students with different kinds of disabilities. Among these electronic devices were adaptive human-computer interfaces and assistive software designed to provide students with visual and auditory impairments a suitable learning experience. After that, I met one of the students with a visual disability to whom I was expected to provide five English sessions as a part of the service project. The first session was dedicated to understanding the student's English level and preferred learning methods.

This was necessary, as it allowed me to plan and conduct the remaining sessions based on this student's specific needs. We started with an interactive discussion about her experiences with English. The student pointed out that her knowledge of English language was extremely low, as her previous educational institution did not place much emphasis on teaching this subject. When she was accepted at SQU, she was eager to continue learning English, but was taught at an intermediate level as this was sufficient for her major. The student expressed a tremendous desire to learn and relied on “Duolingo” to study in her own time, as this application allows individuals with special needs to learn different languages.

In the sessions that followed, as the student expressed her desire to expand her conversational skills, through role play, we improvised likely conversations at a restaurant, mall, salon, and so on. To ensure that she could recall our sessions, the student used her Braille device to record

our exchanges in English, along with Arabic translation. In one of the sessions, the student asked me to teach her to use Instagram, as this application is only available in English. Together, we discussed the meaning of each page and term, which the student recorded, as described above. The next day, she was already using the Instagram app with great skill. While I expected that this project would be a valuable experience for me, it surpassed all my expectations. As I had no prior experience or chance to engage with people with special needs, I am glad that I have found communicating with this student easy and very inspiring.

Dealing with the devices the students use at the Disability Center to facilitate their learning process was also a valuable learning experience for me. I was given the opportunity to witness how various adaptive technologies, such as screen readers and Braille displays, are used by those with visual impairments. This has not only expanded my technological knowledge but has also made me realize that apps and phones that are intended for blind people are limited and not very user-friendly. I witnessed the difficulties the student faced in navigating and using certain applications that were supposedly created to assist visually disabled users.

The experience also brought valuable insights which facilitated my personal growth. First, it made me much more aware of the importance of clear communication and understanding individual preferences before preparing the class and content. I learned how to modify my teaching strategies to align them with the student's requirements and preferences. In addition, utilizing different learning methods made the entire experience more enjoyable and fulfilling. My work with this student also deepened my understanding of the importance of empathy and patience in teaching, as the student needed to record all the information using the Braille device and then translate it into Arabic before the lesson could proceed further.

Moreover, working with a student who has a visual disability has opened my eyes to the fact that, despite rapid technological advances in different domains, much more needs to be done to provide the devices and tools that will fully benefit people with visual disability. The only drawback regarding this experience is a small number of sessions I was allocated, as I would have enjoyed working with this student over a much longer period. I found that, just as we were settling into a good rhythm, the sessions were over. As a significant portion of our lessons was taken up by writing and transcribing, it would have been useful to extend this process in order to ensure that the student fully benefits from this learning experience.

The purpose of this case study was to investigate the possibility of integrating service learning into a curriculum of an undergraduate literature course. A visit to the SQU's Disability Center and experience teaching English to one of the students with a disability was beneficial not only for the student but also for me, as I previously pointed out. Although the number of sessions was limited, this overall experience was successful and it inspired personal and ethical growth. Working with this student made me more aware of the need for further technological advances to ensure that the needs of people with special needs are adequately met, especially when such tools are used in education. This experience also made me aware of my social responsibility, prompting me to consider other ways to include people with special needs in the activities of everyday life. Some recommendations for future research and action would be encouraging more students to volunteer to teach English to students with special needs at SQU, as there are limited resources and educational opportunities available for them in this field. More volunteering opportunities will not only help students with special needs to improve their English language skills but will also create a more inclusive and communicative learning environment here at SQU.