

HON 351: Stories that Heal - Narrative Writing in the Helping Professions

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Course Description:

This is a service learning course. Its primary purpose is to help you develop narrative competence, which physician Rita Charon describes as “the ability to acknowledge, absorb, interpret, and act on the stories and plights of others.” The hours you spend in your service placement will not only give you the chance to relate to people and observe situations relevant to your profession, but it will also enrich course readings, invigorate class discussions, and fuel the writing you do for the class. Aside from your service, the course is broken into three major parts. We will spend the first month equipping ourselves with knowledge, tools, and habits of mind that will enhance our abilities to both receive and tell stories. We will consider what mindful service looks like, and we will work to cultivate compassion, presence, and self-awareness. During the next seven weeks of the course, we will hone our narrative competence by reading, discussing, and collecting others’ stories. In the final month of the course, you and your classmates will share your own stories—committing a service-related personal experience to written narrative. You will receive feedback on your personal essay in a class-wide workshop, and you will revise that essay for your final exam.

My hope is that this class will initiate a reflective writing practice that will expand your capacity to act with kindness and empathy toward the people you serve, your colleagues, and yourself as you navigate a complex and demanding vocational journey.

Service:

The service placements for this class will be offered through the Community Service-Learning office and the Institute for Innovation in Health and Human Services. In the first weeks of class, you will learn about potential placement options, rank your choices, and be assigned to a service site. Each of your placements will be relevant in some way to your professional path. You may not end up in the exact same field or environment, but you will still have the opportunity to learn and integrate your experiences into your understanding of your profession.

You will be expected to provide at least 15 hours of service to the organization or program to which you are assigned. That’s about the equivalent of two work days—not a lot of time to make meaningful observations or to develop relationships with colleagues, clients, students, and/or supervisors. If you are willing and able to provide more service, I encourage you to do so. It is your job to arrange your service schedule with your site supervisor and to report your hours via the provided Google form.

Please treat your service obligation like a job: Show up on time. Treat everyone you encounter with respect, dignity, and patience. Do a good job with whatever tasks you’re assigned to, not matter how dull or difficult. We’ll talk more about expectations when you sign your service agreement.

Course Readings:

Diangelo, Robin. *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-0807047415.

The readings for this course come from a variety of sources. You’ll read chapters and articles from academic texts in fields ranging from narrative medicine to disability studies to rhetoric and

composition. You'll read interviews and creative nonfiction from literary magazines and listen to podcasts online.

Writing Assignments:

There are several *informal writing assignments* that you will regularly complete for this class:

- **Journal:** Over the course of the semester, you will complete weekly journal entries of 2-3 double-spaced pages. In them, you will respond to assigned readings, class discussions, and/or the service you completed that week. I will provide several prompts to stimulate your thinking, but you also can write about whatever is on your mind.
- **Meditation reflections:** You will complete one or more mindfulness exercises every week. Every Monday, you will submit a paragraph-long reflection on what you felt or observed before, during, and after the exercise.
- **Discussion boards:** Prior to every class, I will make a discussion board available for you to contribute questions or topics that you would like to discuss in class. Several times throughout the semester, I will require you to contribute to these discussion boards.

You will also complete two *formal writing assignments* for this class:

- **Interview:** Based on the questions you have developed in class and at your service site, you will select someone with the experience or expertise to shed light on those questions, and you will record an interview with them. You will then provide an edited transcription of that interview (6-8 pages, 1.5 spacing), along with a short profile of the interviewee.
- **Personal Essay:** You will write a personal essay of 10-15 double-spaced pages. This will be a narrative, literary piece of creative nonfiction that explores events, ideas, or themes relevant to the class, your service placement, and/or your profession. The class will “workshop” a late draft of this piece, and you will then revise it for your final exam.

At the end of the semester, you will provide written and oral feedback on each of your classmates' personal essays in a 20-25 minute workshop. For each workshop, you must submit:

- **Workshop Comments:** You will provide approximately 200 words of written feedback on each of your peers' essays prior to their workshops.