

【Practical Report】
Service Learning in the Language Classroom

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THIS INTEREST PIECE HIGHLIGHTS THE SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION of a community service component into an ESL course. After an introduction of the particular program and course circumstances, the procedure of implementation along with challenges and successes are discussed. Finally, the author advocates and makes recommendations for incorporating service learning into a language learning course or program.

Course Background

Language Fluency, the course herein discussed, was developed and taught during the fall 2015 and 2016 semesters in the Ohio Program of Intensive English (OPIE) at Ohio University (OU). The author developed and incorporated a service learning component for a group of 40 visiting exchange program students (CEFR Level: A2) from Chubu University's (CU) English Language and Culture Department.

Service learning offers benefits to students, teachers, and community partners (Center for Community-Engaged Learning at the University of Minnesota, n.d.). These include increased engagement with course content, deeper understanding of the local community and its social issues, and hands on experience working with community members.

Procedure

Upon receiving the above teaching assignment, the instructor leveraged the resources of two offices on OU's campus: the Campus Involvement Center, which helps students find service opportunities and the Center for Campus and Community Engagement, which helps instructors incorporate service learning into existing courses or develop service-learning based courses. These offices provided contact information for around 30 local organizations. The latter office also offered to meet and discuss options and best practices to help get the course started. Next was matching course objectives with not only the textbook, but also with the local organizations. A major implication of the service learning component was that other individuals and organizations, their own goals and organizational and logistical requirements were also considerations in planning the semester and how students would achieve learning outcomes. After the initial steps, coordinating, planning, and executing service visits took up a considerable amount of time throughout the semester.

Challenges

As is common in ESL programs, instructors often do not know what classes they will be assigned to teach until immediately before the semester on account of international enrollment practices at U.S. universities. The author was assigned to teach the Language Fluency course for the CU exchange students and develop a service learning component to the course only five days before the first class meeting. Ideally, as was made clear through consultations with the community outreach offices on OU's campus, courses incorporating service opportunities ought to be planned six months to a year before being taught. Building meaningful and beneficial partnerships with community organizations requires lots of ongoing planning and commitment from both parties. Ideally this would

happen long before a semester starts. The last-minute scheduling in ESL programs like OPIE made this impossible unfortunately.

Certain characteristics of my student group posed their own challenges. The Chubu students:

- Were at OU for only one semester, which prevented them from volunteering with organizations that asked for promises of continued weekly hours.
- Could not drive in the U.S., which restricted opportunities to either within walking distance of campus or required the reservation of a van and the availability of a driver.
- Had limited English proficiency, which limited them to low-language demand service opportunities. For example, calling members of the public for donations, manning the register at a recycle and re-use center, building raised-beds for a community garden, and building a house with House for Humanity are tasks that untrained volunteers can perform, but require advanced-level listening and speaking skills to follow specific directions and communicate with team members.

Initially, the OU Center for Campus and Community Engagement advised looking for larger one-off service opportunities where the whole group of students could be bussed out to a location. Opportunities like these would have been ideal for logistical and pedagogical concerns. Logistically, it was much easier to plan for one bus to move all students at one time for one event. Pedagogically, it allows the instructor to devote class time towards preparing all students for the service visit and to link course material and

assignments directly to an experience that all students will share. Such opportunities included:

- the Pawpaw Festival, a popular annual celebration of a fruit native to southeast Ohio (Students were able to volunteer at this event in 2016.).
- a Habitat for Humanity “Blitz Build” of a house for a disadvantaged family.
- the Monday Creek watershed cleanup project.
- Walk the Walk (to raise mental health awareness).
- Little Cities of Black Diamonds, an opportunity to learn about the cultural history of southeast Ohio.

Unfortunately, most of these large events conflicted with other experiential trips that had already been planned for the Chubu students as part of their study abroad (e.g. a trip to New York City). Ultimately, these larger opportunities did not line up well with the students’ busy schedule during the semester and were scrapped as opportunities.

After the difficulty with one-off events, the instructor adapted to finding community partners that were willing to have recurring visits of smaller groups (4-6 students) during the mornings when Chubu student schedules were largely open and OPIE’s student workers were also available for transportation. Despite contacting around 25 local organizations, few of them replied or were structured in a way that was easy for the Chubu students to volunteer. The ReStore, a recycle and reuse store for housing materials and furniture, and the Athens Food Pantry agreed to recurring dates. Unfortunately, these opportunities were perhaps not as interesting as cultural experiences for the Chubu students, even though the work they did was important and helpful.

Although there were many volunteer organizations around the Athens community, finding service opportunities that were meaningful to the Chubu students but also beneficial and not burdensome to the community partners was difficult. Community partners did not want to say no to volunteers, but some may have been hesitant to plan or organize around English language learners' skills because they may require closer attention or pairing with or help from an additional mentor volunteer.

Successes

Despite the challenges and stumbles of a first-time program, overall it was a definite success. Because of the difficulty securing more culturally oriented service opportunities, it was feared that students would be reluctant to sign up for opportunities like trash removal or weeding community gardens. However, they were surprisingly eager to volunteer for the service opportunities. Also, positive feedback was received from all the community partners we worked with, and many of them asked for the next group of students to return the following year. Students as well wrote very positively about their volunteer experiences in their journals for the Language Fluency class. Even when students felt compelled to mention the difficulty of the work, they often reflected that the work was important and that they were proud to have helped do important work.

The student's journals, which were a fluency-focused project, required them to write for 30 minutes one or two times per week. Comparing to before students started volunteering on the service visits and after, there was a clear improvement in their journal entries. Entries became more meaningful and demonstrated clearer expression and critical

thinking. The entries increased in length, and students showed greater use and control of complex grammar. This cannot be attributed to grammar instruction in the course since it was communicative-based and aimed at increasing fluency. However, because students were learning about issues in class, having a variety of experiences volunteering around the community related to those issues, performing tasks to help the community on these issues, and then reflecting on these experiences, they were forced to put complex ideas into English sentences and really grapple with how to express and order ideas using English grammar.

In a journal entry about their experience cleaning up a dump site in a state forest one student wrote, “[sic] The people throw away trash in a mountain and forest. Because throwing away garbage is costs money. I felt sad. But I thought that it is really good that I participated in that.” Despite errors in maintaining time frame and punctuation, this low level student shows attempt and decent control at compound and compound-complex structures. Another student reflected on becoming aware of their own improvement in listening skills while guiding participants during a 5k race for breast cancer: “[sic] Some people needed maps. When they will say something, I feel nervous, but I could understand what they said so I felt happy. A lot of people said Thank you for me, so I thought I want to do more volunteer works.” This student again demonstrates errors in maintaining consistent tense and aspect, but very appropriately subordinates ideas into dependent and independent clauses and the connections are error-free.

And finally, perhaps the greatest success and benefit of this program is the fact that the students were able to help their local community by getting involved in ways that they

otherwise would never have. Local organizations got much-needed help in fulfilling their missions, and the students gained an experience that will last a lifetime. The benefits of these may not show up on a standardized English test, but after reading students' reflections on problems like trash dump sites in the national forest, it was obvious that they were grappling with ideas and experiences that they never had before, and it was requiring them to truly think about the conditions of the local community. It is one thing to tell students that many of the surrounding communities in southeast Ohio are poor. It is entirely another thing to be knee deep picking through years of a family's trash dump a mile into the national forest, and then come to terms with what it means to have so little money that illegally dumping trash will save you a few dollars on disposal fees.

Suggestions and Recommendations

If you are considering building a service learning component into your language program or language course, the following are a few suggestions derived from the author's experience of developing and executing such a component two times.

- Start planning and contacting community partners before the semester, if possible.
- Building relationships with community partners is the key to continued success.

Once you have established yourself and your students as reliable and helpful, organizations are much more willing to arrange service visits in the future. These relationships cannot be built overnight, hence the first bullet point.

- Be prepared for a large time commitment behind the scenes that includes more administrative tasks than instructors may otherwise be used to. These include,

communicating, coordinating, planning, driving, and actually performing the volunteer work with students. Instructors' teaching load should be reduced, or their workload in some other way adjusted to account for the extra workload.

- Remember that the non-profit organizations have their own missions to help serve the needs of the local community. They do not exist to give your students volunteer opportunities, or to help you or your program develop a service learning course. They are often under-staffed and have an enormous amount of work to do. You should aim to not burden them with your students. Your students should not be there to earn a certain number of volunteer hours for your class; they should be volunteering to help the community partners achieve their mission.
- Do it. If you feel it may be too complicated or too much work, start small. The benefits of participation for the community members served, the organizations, and your students are definitely worth it, even if it is a small component of your course of program. When the author organized a service visit to pick up trash behind the Nelsonville Correctional Facility, a job usually reserved for convicts, the author really wondered if he was going about service learning the wrong way. Would students even sign up? But to the author's surprise, he found himself driving a 12-passenger van full of excited students out to a water tower behind the prison at eight in the morning. Students competed to see who could collect the most tires, and in their journals wrote about how good it felt to do the work and reflected on why it was important.

- Leverage the resources available at your institution. Service learning is an entire field and the professionals at your school are eager to help you get involved. If your institution does not house a volunteer or community service office, there is likely a student organization.

REFERENCES

Center for Community-Engaged Learning at the University of Minnesota. (n.d.). Benefits of Service-Learning. Retrieved from <http://www.servicelearning.umn.edu/info/benefits.html>

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