

English as a Second Language Courses

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English as a Second Language and Service-Learning are an obvious pairing. Students in these courses often express a desire to use English in natural, purposeful situations with native speakers, or at least with people who do not share the learner's native language. Three models involving courses on differing skills at various proficiency levels at Glendale Community College, a school of 14,000 in a suburb of Los Angeles, have confirmed the "fit" of Service-Learning to ESL and at the same time revealed the complexities of that fit.

Students in an intermediate speaking/listening course are not yet proficient enough in English to hold jobs, yet they know enough English to communicate in a basic way. Our Volunteer and Service-Learning Center (VSLC) places these students at a local retirement home for one-on-one dialog sessions with a retiree. Before their first session, they practice in class asking questions on appropriate topics. Then, as they visit the retirement home an hour a week for eight weeks, they gather data for class discussions on topics relating to American culture. They also write in journals, discuss in groups their progress and frustrations, and give a reflective oral report at the end of the semester. Although some students are initially reluctant to enter homes for the elderly, final reports focus on friendships, lengthy and meaningful conversations, and gains in vocabulary, listening comprehension and self-confidence in English. They also feel the satisfaction of doing good for others as their new friendships lead to running errands, repairing bookshelves, bringing hot soup, and exchanging gifts.

Jen Sun Shi's journal entry reflects on a first session:

When I went to "Windsor Manor" last Friday I was very nervous... I thought to converse with old people was not comfortable in any language. However, "Windsor Manor" was warmer, cozier and more beautiful than I had expected... I met Louise... She had a problem on the spinal column. She who was white, tall and had a tough constitution, liked "Scrabble" game.. She taught me how to play it... and I got several new words from the game. She and I really enjoyed playing it. "

Clearly, intercultural learning accompanies language learning in this project.

In an upper-intermediate course in reading, writing and grammar, success rates have suffered because students lack adequate exposure to English, especially through reading. So students are placed in child development centers. After receiving training by K-12 specialists and a public library children's librarian on selecting books and reading them aloud effectively, students read many books, select a few, practice reading them aloud, then read them to two K-2 children at a time weekly for ten weeks. They write weekly journal entries evaluating the progress of the children and of themselves toward present goals, and they reflect on their experiences in groups during class. After ten weeks, students write on each of various

design their own service project and because we do not require that their projects be directly related to their more traditional studies, only about half of the *Volunteer Service* students end up doing “service-learning” projects in the strict sense of the term. It is for this reason the course title “Volunteer Service” was not changed when the Service-Learning Office was established. However, since developmental studies classes require so much confidence, courage and perseverance of students, these issues are an explicit part of developmental studies course curriculum. Every type of volunteer work that enhances these qualities can be seen as an effective teaching tool and therefore tied closely to the developmental studies curriculum. Whatever the correct terms for the work these students are doing, its power to remind them of the skills they have to build on and the achievements they’ve already attained may be just enough to inspire them to persevere in the classrooms where success has, in the past, been more elusive. Even the suggestion that they have skills to offer is enough to give students a completely new way to see themselves, as this student journal so vividly illustrates:

I don't know if I should really be saying this since I've never actually taught anyone English. Maybe I feel the way I do about it because I feel that I should be more qualified for the task like than what I am now... My family has never really been involved in any type of community service. This could be why I have never considered volunteering myself. I think that it would be nice to give it a try sometime. The biggest obstacle I face in doing this is not being too sure of myself. I suppose that it would all depend on what it is I would be volunteering for. Manual labor would be fine, but teaching someone English or math would make me feel uncomfortable. Teaching English would definitely be a challenge for me. When I stop and think about it, I begin to wonder what it would be like and all of the challenges that it would be composed of. I suppose that it would also be a question of how badly you would like to aid someone. Now that I think of it, maybe it is time to break with tradition and start anew.

Across Disciplinary Boundaries

benefits--language skills, parenting skills, values clarification, career exploration, 'giving back' to the community and acculturation. Class groups collect these evaluations, and each group prepares a different topic as part of a class report sent to the funding source and community agencies as a "real" writing task.

According to one such report,

Many of the students had never read to children before this program, and because we did not want to have a difficult time while reading to the children or disappoint them, we started to go to the libraries and read many children's books each week... With the help of VSL (Volunteer/Service-Learning), some of the students realized that we need to pay more attention to the children of our community, because there are many children that spend most of their days at the centers and have no one to read to them. These children need people like us to read and interact with them.

(Rebeka Megerdichian, Cicely Hunjaya, Arusyak Nikogosyan and Koji Isabe)

Throughout the semester the reading, summary and grammar exercises and in-class essays responding to articles that build skill for writing such a report are all on topics related to community service or reading aloud and thus contribute to making this a content-based course in which all activities are connected by service.

In a third course, an advanced reading and writing course, students learn academic reading skills, write essay tests, learn to do library research, and write a research paper; students who pass are eligible to take Freshman English. The addition of Service-Learning to this course forms a connection between reading, research and writing. The student browses the listings maintained by the VSLC and selects an agency that is as closely related as possible to the student's intended career. During the early weeks of the course she also reads books related to her major. She writes dialog journal entries about both activities. As she searches for an issue to research, she discusses her Service-Learning and library reading in groups with students of similar interests. She evolves a thesis that she can support both with library research and with experiences and observations from her Service-Learning. Having the opportunity to try out her career in advance--to observe and interview people doing the future work, to do some of that work herself and see how that feels--has proven immediately popular.

After a session at an elementary school, Parkoohi Panosian, who is considering becoming a teacher, noted in her journal a feature of American education very different from that of her country:

The math game that they played yesterday was very interesting to me... They learned how to buy... some items with prices and they should choose the items with given money. After my researching I have some idea of creativity. I can understand why they are doing these things. Freedom of thinking gives the children creativity, which is more important than learning more materials without thinking.

Disciplinary Pathways to Service-Learning

By reflecting on her classroom observations, Parkoohi developed questions which led her to a thesis about the role of creativity in education. She and her classmates discovered that integrating theory and practice lends reality and purpose to coursework.

A particular problem of introducing Service-Learning in ESL courses has been that the recent immigrants who are the majority of our population are in a survival mode, working long hours and caring for families, and feeling their foremost obligation to be toward their family, not the wider community. While most students welcome the interactions with native speakers of English, a few students find the extra time for travel to off-campus sites an impossible burden. As a consequence, the GCC Credit ESL Division has established the policy that there be an alternative, on-campus (lab or library) option to Service-Learning for meeting course requirements. Other considerations important to success are adequate English proficiency levels for the tasks, sufficient training, a clear presentation of students' duties and responsibilities as well as rights, and a means of closure (e.g., certificates, lunch). With careful planning to meet objectives and avoid problems, a Service-Learning component can add a most memorable dimension to an ESL course.