SERVICE-LEARNING FOR STUDENTS OF SPANISH: PROMOTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH AN EXCHANGE TUTORING SERVICE

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Abstract: *Service-learning courses are designed to promote civic engagement and social justice, and to connect the classroom with the community in an environment of cooperation and mutual interest. In this article, a service-learning course of Spanish at the university level is supported as a reciprocal language exchange between the campus and the community. According to this course proposal, students attend a Latino community site once a week, where their members are tutored in English and American culture, while students are tutored in Spanish and Spanish-speaking culture. This way, service-learning is connected to the Spanish classroom through "Reflection" sessions led by mentors visiting the class periodically. This course was designed so that students would be able to improve their conversation skills in this exchange tutoring service while they are involved with the community by seeing their members as equal peers.*

Keywords: *civic engagement, community-based learning, cultural awareness knowledge, second language teaching, service-learning.*

Resumen: Los cursos de aprendizaje-servicio son diseñados para promover el compromiso cívico y la justicia social, y para conectar el aula con la comunidad en un entorno de cooperación y de interés mutuo. En este artículo se aboga por un curso de aprendizaje-servicio de español a nivel universitario como un intercambio lingüístico recíproco entre el campus y la comunidad. Según esta propuesta de curso, una vez a la semana los estudiantes asisten a un centro comunitario latino donde les dan una tutoría en inglés y en cultura americana a sus miembros mientras estos les dan una tutoría en español y de la cultura hispanohablante a los estudiantes. De esta manera el aprendizaje-servicio se conecta a la clase de español a través de sesiones de "Reflexiones" lideradas por mentores que visitan la clase periódicamente. Este curso fue diseñado para que los estudiantes pudieran mejorar sus habilidades conversacionales en este servicio de intercambio de tutorías mientras se involucran con la comunidad viendo a sus miembros como iguales.

Palabras clave: compromiso cívico, aprendizaje basado en la comunidad, conocimiento de la conciencia cultural, enseñanza de segunda lengua, aprendizaje-servicio.

1. INTRODUCTION

Service-learning has been defined as "a teaching method whereby didactic learning in the classroom is enhanced through service to others in a structured process that guides reflection on the service experience and promotes demonstration of the knowledge and skills acquired." (Smith, Gahangan, McQuillin, Haywood, Cole, Bolton & Wampler, 2011:317). Thus, service-learning courses are increasingly seen as an additional component to language programs and as an opportunity to support many institutions' mission of civic engagement and social justice. Students are trained to become educated citizens, to appreciate how democracy works, and to become active participants in it (Astin, 1994). At the same time, they get to practice the target language and raise their cultural awareness in a natural immersion environment as a mini-abroad experience and learn from the community.

As it is well known, the main objectives of service-learning are to connect students with other communities to solve racial, ethnic, and social problems in urban societies and to bridge barriers between cultures, enhancing active reflection and action in our students (Hess, 1994; Slimbach, 1995). The service-learning experience creates an environment of mutual interest, cooperation, and dedication between the students and the community members, offering students the unique opportunity to enhance their knowledge about the Spanish speaking-world through

community service. It must be placed within a curriculum that promotes engaged learning inside and outside the classroom (Caldwell, 2007). According to Carney (2013), one of the central goals of service-learning is fostering citizenship and moral development as well as academic excellence. Given my experience teaching Spanish with a service-learning component, in this article the focus is on how this can contribute to developing students' linguistic and pragmatic competence as well as their cultural knowledge of the community while at the same time they are working towards equality and integration.

2. MISUNDERSTADINGS ABOUT WHAT A SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE ENTAILS

In his workbook on how to design a service-learning course, Howard (2001) exposed four well-known myths that led to misunderstandings and that we should keep in mind:

1. *Terminology*: Academic service-learning is not the same as student community service or co-curricular service-learning. They are distinguished by their learning agenda: student community service does not follow one, but academic and co-curricular do. Another difference is that co-curricular service-learning is concerned with raising students' awareness of social issues and academic service-learning uses the experience as a living text for academic learning and civil engagement.

2. *Conceptualization*: Academic service-learning is not just a name for internships. These latter are not about civic learning and the emphasis is only on students' benefits while academic service-learning puts emphasis on both.

3. *Synonymy:* Experience is not the same as learning. Learning requires more than experience so the experience students get when they are engaged with the community does not necessarily involve learning. That is why reflection sessions are needed so that learning can take place through purposeful and intentional efforts.

4. *Marginality:* Academic service-learning is much more than just an addition of service to a traditional course. It has to be integrated with the course, service has to be relevant, meaningful, and with the purpose of enhancing academic learning and directly involving students in active civic participation within a democracy.

3. HALLMARKS OF HIGH-QUALITY SERVICE-LEARNING COURSES

According to Smith *et al.* (2011), in order to create an effective service-learning course, there are a number of components that have to be considered:

1. *Integrated learning*: Explicitly linked to the academic objectives of the course (Duncan & Kopperud, 2008). Learning objectives are explicitly established. In terms of assessment, academic credit is awarded for academic and civic learning, not for doing service. This challenging intellectual work must follow rigorous academic standards (Howard, 2001).

2. *Community service*: It has to respond to the needs of the community and the academic goals of the course (Kaye, 2004). Partnerships are usually established and last longer than the course. What really matters is making an important contribution to the community in need.

3. *Collaborative development and management*: Reciprocal learning where community members and university students teach and learn from each other sharing their expertise (Kitzrow, 1998).

4. *Civic engagement and a sense of community responsibility*: Students learn to think critically about their role in society and how they can make a difference (Duncan & Kopperud, 2008). Howard (2001) proposed seven categories of contributing to students' civic learning: academic learning, democratic citizenship learning, diversity learning, political learning, leadership learning, inter- and intra-personal learning, and social responsibility learning. In the first one, students analyzed the causes of social problems. Then they became familiar with different conceptualizations of citizenship; they learned how citizen groups had produced change in their communities. In the leadership learner category and the inter-intra personal learning, students had an understanding of a model of leadership and their own multiple identities. Finally, in the last category, they were trained in how they can act in socially responsible ways.

5. *Contemplation*: Reflections were crucial after service in the classroom. These sessions led to a synthesis of the knowledge they had about themselves and about the world. Reflections had to be effective including community needs and the academic goals of the course (Duncan & Kopperud, 2008).

6. *Evaluation and disclosure*: Critical evaluation of the service was needed to interpret the learning that took place (Kaye, 2004). Evidence-based approaches to service were necessary for students and community members so that projects could move forward through corrective feedback.

4. THE ROLE OF SERVICE IN A SPANISH COURSE

One of the main benefits of offering a Spanish course with a service-learning component at the university level is increasing the rigor of the Spanish programs through meaningful community partnerships and reinforcing the intellectual engagement of our students in and outside of the classroom (Carney, 2013). In addition, there are also linguistic advantages for our students. In class, instructors provide the linguistic tools necessary to learn a second language. In the community, students have the opportunity to expand on what they learn in the classroom. In sum, both experiences are essential for second language acquisition (Ebacher, 2013).

According to Howard (2001), it is expected to minimize the distinction between the student's community learning role and classroom learning role. Since both of them have different learning contexts, students assume different learning roles: while in the classroom they usually play a more passive one, in the community it is always more active. Therefore, Howard suggests shaping both learning environments so that the distinction is minimal. One way of doing this is making students play more active roles in the classroom by enhancing construction of knowledge. In this scenario, faculty roles have to be reformulated towards learning facilitation and guidance.

In a class with these characteristics, approximately 20 students are required to attend a Latino community center site once a week for three hours. They have the opportunity to take intermediate and advanced Spanish courses with a service-learning component. Student mentors can be assigned as a liaison between the campus and the community; they might offer the students a free commute from campus and once there, the Latino community members are tutored in English and American traditions while the university students are mentored in Spanish and Spanish-speaking culture while student mentors lead the sessions. In short, community service acts as a living text. The main objective of this arrangement is to create a mutually beneficial relationship since both parts learn from one another. The sites serve new immigrants from Latin America who are integrating into the American culture. For the students, community service plays a crucial role in practicing Spanish, participating in class discussions, and adding to their cultural competence. They improve their conversation skills and their vocabulary and fluency in Spanish as well as their communicative competence and confidence while exchanging perspectives on social justice issues with the Latino community members.

Petrov (2013) showed similar findings in her pilot study in an intermediate Spanish annual course sequence also in the Chicago area. She reported gains in communicative skills, dispositional learning, language, identity formation, identification, and solidarity with Latino communities of the area. She considered this to be a transformative experience for students since this opportunity engages them in social justice education and education for democracy.

In these Spanish courses, students are able to discuss relevant social issues concerning Latino communities such as immigration or politics. Therefore, it is easier to connect the content covered in the classroom with that in the service. Moreover, since these topics are politically charged, there is a demand for civic and ethical engagement (Carney, 2013). This engagement is extended to students' studies and the impact service-learning has on retention (Gallini & Moely, 2003).

By this mutual exchange of tutoring and mentoring, relationships are formed that expose commonalities at the core of humanity. Despite the differences between them, the awareness of the social realities of Latino communities in Chicago provided students with the responsibility of ensuring justice and equality. Therefore, they managed to use their knowledge of Spanish to solve problems and to acquire a new understanding of social issues.

This program is based on Paolo Freire's ideas ("*Pedagogy of the oppressed*"). According to his model, participants from different backgrounds (students and community members) engaged in a true dialogue where life experiences were discussed. Critical consciousness was developed through reflection and action ultimately leading to social change; this is what he called "conscientisation".

With this course, students can fulfill the experiential learning credit that requires that students be able to draw connections between course content and experiences off-campus.

5. CONNECTING THE CLASSROOM WITH THE SERVICE SITE

One of the main challenges of a course like this is making sure there is a meaningful link between the classroom and the service. In order to do that, there must be continuous contact between the coordinator of the program, the student mentor, and the instructor. They should visit the classroom every three weeks to lead Reflection sessions about students' impressions of their experiences at the service site: "Reflection is the hyphen in service-learning; it is the process that helps students connect what they observe and experience in the community with their academic study" (Eyler, 2001:35). These reflections are also expressed via different formats (written and oral) such as journal writing (students have to write a journal periodically showing their feelings and reflections after each session) or discussion boards. However, this might not be enough if there is no guidance from faculty.

Menlo (1993) proposed four competencies to increase student learning from the community: reflective listening, feedback, observation, and mindfulness in thinking. Since Reflections are an essential ingredient for a service-learning course, it is necessary for them to be meaningful. Eyler, Giles and Schmiede (1996) found reflections to be more effective if they conform to the four C's:

1. *Continuous*: Reflection activities must take place regularly along the course.

2. *Connected*: Directly related to learning goals.

3. *Challenging*: Demanding efforts from the students with instructor's feedback to facilitate learning.

4. *Contextualized*: Appropriate for the specific course.

At the same time, the instructor should visit the site from time to time to observe the dynamics of the session and to improve the communication. Then, on a weekly basis, discussion questions are posted online by the instructor through discussion boards so that students can express their opinions in Spanish or English and provide him/her and the mentors with feedback about orientation week, the program and the reflection sessions. Thus, students are integrated into real-world contexts and the community becomes a live interactive text (Caldwell, 2007). A few examples of possible discussion questions are the following:

1. *First impressions about Orientation Week:* How did you like it there? If you were in this program before, did you notice any differences? Are there more community members? Describe your first impressions about your community site and your expectations. How many community members visited the site this week? What are the activities that you did in interaction with them that you enjoyed the most and that are more beneficial for your service-learning experience?

2. *The program:* After one or two sessions, do you have a more specific idea of what this program is about and its dynamics? Could you describe it? Is it what you thought it was going to be? Explain. Are there any challenges or issues you have been struggling with? Feel free to discuss any aspects that have been hard for you and offer suggestions about how to overcome any difficulties. In every session, you get to bring food and have dinner with the community members. What did you learn about Hispanic food? What field trips would you like to do in the city? Would you like visiting Hispanic neighborhoods, tasting Hispanic food, and/or attending a Latino film festival?

3. *Reflections:* How did you like the Reflection sessions? Do you think these sessions help to improve the program? Do you think it is an effective way of connecting the program with the classroom? In what ways has this program changed your life? What have your learned? Have you changed your mind about the community members once you got to meet them?

Caldwell (2007) suggested that the instructor serve as a liaison and a communicator between the classroom and the service and students are guided to become active learners in this dialogical framework. In order for this course to be cohesive and coherent, it is very important to closely link the service to the course material to elevate their experience as central to their learning (Gibson, Hauf, Long & Simpson,2011).

6. COMMUNITY SITES

Depending on the enrollment of the course, we might only work with one or two of renowned Latino community sites in Chicago that perform a similar job in terms of serving Latino communities. We would offer students flexibility not only regarding the location of the sites but also regarding scheduling since every site meets a different day. These sites serve diverse neighborhoods in Chicago and these are some of the services they provide: citizenship

preparation and other legal advice, youth after-school programs, leadership programs, ESL, GED, and literacy classes.

Their missions have many similarities:

1. Providing opportunities for the community members with low resources. Through education, they emphasize the development of community leadership and self-reliance.

2. Promoting an inclusive society with low-income Latino families through advocacy and collaborative action. Their missions are based on the core values of human dignity, service, respect, and social change.

3. Advancing human rights and addressing the social needs of minority populations leading to a more equalitarian society.

7. SPANISH SERVICE-LEARNING IN CHICAGO

As Petrov (2013) found in her service-learning study in Chicago, students reported gains in communicative skills, self-confidence, and solidarity with Latino communities. They became really aware of the challenges Chicago Latino communities were facing so it became a transformative experience for them and involved them in a search for social justice and civil engagement for the sake of democracy. In her study, the student population was heritage speakers of Spanish instead of second language learners like in this program so they shared a common identity. This difference implied that the motivations for including a service-learning component were not the same. One of our focuses was the practice and improvement of language proficiency (language-exchange program) rather than achieving attitudinal learning goals. However, we shared a common goal: to increase solidarity between students and communities. As Kanost (2014) argued, students were more confident in the improvement in their communication skills in the service-learning course than in the regular Spanish course. In a city like Chicago where Spanish is not a foreign language for many communities, the service-learning experience becomes an alternative to study abroad programs to promote linguistic and cultural immersion as students clearly identified and valued.

8. APPROACHES TO THE INTEGRATION OF COMMUNITY-BASED PRACTICES INTO THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM

Rosing (2008) claimed that many institutions that implemented service in the past had worked with low-income and underprivileged communities with the objective of doing research or acquiring international prestige rather than collaborating towards social justice and equality.

Students learned to see the community as an asset where knowledge lied. They started seeing these neighborhoods differently as they challenged stereotypes and understood what respect for human dignity entailed: they could learn from those who were erroneously perceived as lacking knowledge. It is very important to teach students to see that we cannot appropriate their knowledge with the sole objective of doing research but rather to develop partnerships from which all the parties benefit. At the same time, these partnerships were based on projects developed by the organizations.

One of the outcomes of service-learning is critical thinking. Students start reflecting on the causes of social inequalities, the origin of these barriers, and how current changes involve policy making. Ultimately, the university can educate agents of social change (through advocacy, activism, or social justice). This is one of the most radical and transformational pedagogies since it connects theory and practice, the academic world and the real world, and different approaches to learning and thinking (Carney, 2013). Moreover, students take an active part in the creation of knowledge as a result of interaction and reflection. In service-learning courses learning occurs through experience (Ebacher, 2013).

9. ACADEMIC GOALS FOR A SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE

Slimbach (1995) argued that there are important academic and humanitarian goals that are expected in these courses:

1. Expanding students' knowledge of social problems and how to address them.

2. Enabling students to interact with a community that they do not belong to and to leave their comfort zone.

3.   Breaking down barriers and building bridges with other communities.

4.   Introducing students to an experiential learning opportunity.

5.   Teaching students the true meaning of "service".

6.   Teaching students how to analyze social issues from a critical perspective.

In sum, in order for a service-learning course to be effective, the connection between the community and the academic goals has to be clear and direct (Carney, 2013). Therefore, careful planning, implementation, and assessment are crucial (Ebacher, 2013).

10. THE SESSIONS

Throughout the sessions, community members develop changing views on themselves, the university students, and social issues. That is, they start seeing themselves on an equal level regarding the university students rather than being served by them since they are provided with expert roles and this experience empowers them; they find themselves in a middle ground where knowledge is created and is multi-directional and their voices are heard when expressing their perspectives on social issues that directly affect their communities (d'Arlach, Sánchez, & Feuer, 2009). The aspirations of these sessions are to narrow the distance between the university and the community and to increase civic engagement. A reflection of this can be found when students express their interest in working in the community beyond the requirement (Carney, 2013). In fact, my students only had to take a course to fulfill the requirement and most of them stayed the whole academic year. Because of the current available resources in terms of research and funding, it is easier now for institutions supporting service-learning to accomplish their mission. In addition to the improvement of the community, one of the main advantages of these sessions is that the knowledge that is created is local and in collaboration with the community.

In programs of this type, students can be offered transportation from campus to the Latino community sites that are off- campus and mentors from the university can be the leaders of the sessions. The structure of the sessions is divided into two parts: during the first half, students and community members are paired up and practice Spanish and English through exercises from the textbook that students do in both languages to encourage partners to get to know one another's background, as well as practice vocabulary. These exercises are usually a game or a presentation since the environment is very casual and laid-back. Students are only allowed to speak Spanish and community members only English. During the break, they have dinner together while sharing American-Latino food culture and in the second half, they all discuss social issues and reflect together while exploring cultural, power, and class differences between the community and university students, and finally, they get to propose alternatives to solve these issues. This discussion, then, becomes a dialogue that develops into a deeper understanding of reality and a desire for justice and equality. The highest level of learning was "conscientisation", the awareness of social problems to the point of intervening to change them (d'Arlach *et al.,* 2009). The treatment of these topics is conducted via stories and articles related to social issues, and the reflection in a group format. The reflection topics include immigration reform, neighborhood violence, fascism, and students' job prospects after graduation.

11. COMMUNITY MEMBERS *vs.* UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Despite the background differences between the students and the community members, discussions tend to be democratic. Most community members' origin are low-income with an education of high school or less versus the university students, who tend to be more homogenous in age and socioeconomic status (primarily middle class) and they are U.S. citizens. What is really fascinating is the evolution in overcoming stereotypes in both directions leading to equality by the last weeks of service. Throughout the sessions, students usually feel more comfortable with their Spanish since they do not feel judged and vice versa. As they develop feelings of trust and comfort, stereotypes are reduced. Despite the apparent differences between both groups, they end up seeing each other as humans with similar struggles and daily challenges and students experience a willingness to help adult learners (Plann, 2002).

There is also evidence that students who took part in service-learning are different than those who did not: in the study carried out by Eyler, Giles and Braxton (1997), after their experience with the community, the students showed more positive citizenship values and views of social justice as well as higher self-confidence in terms of skills and personal efficacy. Students had the opportunity to apply what they learned in the classroom (how to apply knowledge of a language in an authentic context), to explore careers, to improve their social responsibility and commitment with the community, and finally, to enhance their personal growth (Alonso Marks, 2008).

According to d'Arlach *et al.* (2009), there were multiple advantages for community members too: they learned how to speak up and express their opinions, reflections became support groups, and they had the opportunity to serve as translators and tutors to perform a committed action such as teaching a literacy class. There were other advantages for both groups such as the following: this partnership between the university and the community was reciprocal and asset-based, knowledge flowed in both directions, and they changed their previous opinions of and among themselves.

12. BENEFITS OF THE SERVICE-LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR OUR STUDENTS

The mutual exchange partnerships allow them to improve their Spanish while they are helping to improve the community members' English. At a more personal level, they build relationships speaking in the target language and this in turn motivates them to learn Spanish and to work towards social justice. Another unique benefit is the opportunity for linguistic and cultural immersion without leaving the country (especially beneficial for those who did not have the opportunity to study abroad). They feel more comfortable using the language with native speakers in a casual environment, where peer interaction is promoted and where they can relax and gain confidence about their use of the language and not feel judged. In fact, most of them consider that their Spanish greatly improves, not only in terms of the development of their oral skills but also in analyzing complex social issues in Spanish.

They get so excited about seeing the progress in their linguistic competence that they usually demand to be taught "slang" vocabulary so that they can communicate in a more natural way. They appreciate the dynamics of the sessions and the role of the mentor. These sessions should be led with a certain flexibility, encouraging the students and community members to guide the discussion to explore social issues on their own and bring the sessions to a personal level. That way they can stop seeing themselves as outsiders but as a part of a community. That is, it should not feel like a classroom format but rather like being in a little family and building a community. The mentors are highly rated with regards to creating a cozy and safe environment to share their opinions and feelings.

Despite all these advantages for our students, there is still room for improvement. As we had anticipated, one of the biggest challenges we face is recruiting more community members to attend sessions regularly. Because of their busy job schedule (most of them have several jobs), it is hard to retain them and to find a balance between the amount of students (who are required to attend all sessions to fulfill the service-learning requirement) and the amount of community members. This limitation might make the mentors restructure the dynamics of the sessions and promote more discussion groups rather than one-on-one activities. In terms of the sessions' content, students appreciate having more time to share their personal stories and more opportunities to review the grammar they are learning in the classroom and less structure that would provide them with more freedom to improvise. They are usually so highly motivated that a few of them would be happy to do some volunteer work in a Latino neighborhood in Chicago to establish a deeper bond with the community. Due to these bonds the students build with the community members, they might be willing to go beyond the sessions and meet outside the facility with the community members through organizing field trips in Latino neighborhoods in the city, going to dance or singing karaoke. Certainly, the relationships they form mostly go beyond the community site. Another factor that they highly appreciate is the transformative aspect of this experience in widening their tolerance towards diversity. Many students feel so much empathy towards the Latino community members as they are consolidating deeper bonds that they start developing more tolerant perspectives towards immigration or political issues directly concerning these communities.

13. CONCLUSIONS

Spanish courses with a service-learning component are a great opportunity for students to practice their Spanish in a natural immersion environment while serving Latino communities. In order to be effective, there must be a close connection between the academic curriculum and the service. Ultimately, the five C's of language learning have to be integrated: Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Community (Ebacher, 2013).

In this article, the focus has been on the structure of a Spanish course with a service-learning component based on a language exchange between university students and Latino community members. The benefits and limitations of this course are presented, as well as the use of Reflection sessions to connect the service with the classroom and how we implement students' feedback into the improvement of our program by allowing them to become active learners in their transformative experiences. Students are driven towards improvement in their communicative and pragmatic skills while at the same time they are developing a sense of community on a weekly basis that encourages them to take action beyond the classroom and community sites. Service sites and the classroom become the places where language, cultural exchange, and social justice reflections take place to lead the students on a path towards equality and democracy.

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