

Teaching English for and with Communities

In ancient Peru, the city of Chiclayo was home to the Cloud People—*Los Chachapoyans*—*Moche* kings, and *El Señor de Siapan*. A historic crossroads between jungle and coast, between north and south, modern Chiclayo bustles with migrants and immigrants working for a better life in this city celebrated as “The City of Friendship.”

Seven days a week, we teach English as a foreign language to thousands of Chiclayanos—in an autonomous, not-for-profit cultural center in the heart of the city. Young learners, adolescents, and adults from all walks of life enroll in our classes; and we love what we do. However, we are often aware of a sense of uncertainty among our young people—a sense that no matter how much they study, or what degree they obtain, there is little opportunity for them in their communities. Sometimes it seems that nothing will change. In our context, learning English is often perceived as a way out. However, we reject the notion that institutions like ours can do nothing to influence individuals’ perceptions that their communities can never change. In this narrative, we propose

that institutions like ours can ultimately bear witness to a collective commitment to the societies in which we live.

Thinking beyond the classroom

This story begins in early 2002, with the arrival of Spencer, a visiting North American teacher educator and proponent of participatory in-service teacher development, or what has come to be known as “reflective practice.” Theories of reflective practice argue that by thinking closely about what happens in their classrooms, teachers can make better sense of who they are, how they became that way, and how they might be otherwise (see, e.g., Golombek 1998; Golombek and Johnson 2004; Johnson 1999, 2000; Johnson and Golombek 2002; Parrott 1993; Richards 1998; Richards and Lockhart 1996).

Our institution, like others around the world, has a tradition of a well thought-out, established program using a popular commercial textbook series as its framework. As enrollment and staff numbers continue to grow, the center’s administrators have looked to

in-service professional development as a means of sustaining the quality of our English language programming.

Our first meetings with Spencer focused on reflecting about our classrooms and institution, thinking long and hard about ways they could change for the better, and working together to make those changes happen. For example, the ways our teachers interacted with supervisors and vice versa were often awkward and linked to a feeling of uneasiness about observation and evaluation of instruction. One way of addressing this particular shortcoming was for us to move from a more traditional, vertical model of teacher observation to a more horizontal model of team-teaching that has been described in a similar context in a sister institution (see Salas 2005).

Looking back, however, we realized that our tendency was to limit our introspection to the ins and outs of our instructional repertoires and the community that existed within our institution. But things were happening outside the walls of the center, and those events were perhaps even more profound in shaping our professional abilities and personal commitment.

We conceded the need to complicate our understanding of “reflective practitioner” with another body of literature framing teachers as “transformative intellectuals” (Giroux 1988). So we began reading and talking about teachers whose classrooms had become a space for social justice and change (see, e.g., L. Delpit 1995; L. D. Delpit and Dowdy 2002; Freire 2000; Freire and Freire 1994; Hooks 1994; Jordan 1998; Shor 1992). We wanted the same for our classrooms; in October 2002, we began thinking about what civic education could mean for us.

Thinking and teaching like civic educators

For many, “civic education” conjures up childhood memories of singing national anthems and saluting flags. Although this certainly is one focus of civic education, it was not ours. Instead, civic education meant taking our institution into the community and bringing more of the community to our institution. With that local understanding, we began thinking about what a civic education pilot project might look like.

In short order, we settled on a three-tiered approach that included an intergenerational read-

ing project, in-service professional development for K–12 teachers of English, and the revamping of our own institution’s advanced curriculum. We summarize each of the modules below.

Chiclayo Reads

Chiclayo Reads—an intergenerational reading program aimed at bringing together our advanced level students and economically disadvantaged children from the community—was the first component of our pilot project. We pictured the reading program as a way of connecting our advanced students more personally with the larger Chiclayo community through service.

In post-industrial global economies, literacy is an assumed condition for participation in a democracy. Moreover, literacy research has highlighted the centrality of reading to students’ long-term academic achievement (see, e.g., Krashen 1994). Such achievement largely depends on establishing a love of reading at a young age. So, we decided to reach out to some of the children in our community who had little contact with our institution by pairing our advanced students with young readers in the community.

A call for student volunteers went out and some 15 advanced English learners received pre-service training about literacy instruction for young children from two of our veteran teachers and our cultural director. In the meantime, a local elementary classroom was identified as a potential partner, and a meeting was arranged to present the project. At the meeting, most of the questions from the audience were expressions of disbelief that the program would be completely free of charge—with materials, transportation, and a light snack all covered by the institution.

Not long thereafter, our advanced level students began meeting on Saturday afternoons, from 1:00 to 2:30 in the center’s library, with 45 children from a Chiclayo neighborhood. They participated in various literacy activities for young learners in English.

Summer Institute for K–12 English teachers

Two of our veteran teachers spearheaded the second part of the pilot project: in-service professional development for the city’s K–12 public school teachers of English. In our context, state-sponsored education is inadequately funded. Consequently, school teachers in our communities face enormous challenges—often enormous class-sizes, lim-

ited resources, and inconsistent institutional support. For many years, cost has prohibited professional development.

In response to these challenges, our teachers and academic director designed a two-month, full-day professional development institute for public school teachers that addressed issues of their own language development and classroom practice. Free of charge, the Summer Institute was attended by 60 public school teachers that first year. The center paid the salary of the two teachers coordinating and teaching the Institute and the cost of the instructional materials for every participating public school teacher.

The advanced curriculum

The final piece of the project was our own advanced curriculum, specifically, the conversation and academic reading and writing courses. Fortunately, we had already started modifying the advanced cycle when we started thinking about our civic education pilot. Taking advantage of that coincidence, our academic director and a team of advanced teachers integrated themes of civic education into the advanced cycles. These themes were conceived as starting points for participatory, collaborative activities such as role-play, discussion, reading, and writing—all focusing on contemporary culture.

Sometimes a concern in civic education coupled with a reflective strategy, such as freewriting, was the prelude to a lesson, a way of creating a space for reflection. Other times, a carefully chosen reading about a social issue established reflection as part of the daily routine and set the stage for shared inquiry. At other times, we used a contemporary concern coupled with an activity to conclude a lesson. In short, we felt that the advanced curriculum was a space for our students and ourselves to move beyond the standard curriculum of a commercial textbook and towards matters that all of us cared about deeply (see Salas and Garson 2007).

Getting started

For us, teaching for and with communities was a mix of outreach, service learning, and curriculum reform. Our experience potentially informs other institutions in the process of rethinking who they are. We offer the suggestions below to other institutions of progressive intellectuals hoping to engage in a similar process.

1. Begin a dialogue

Begin an open exchange with teachers, students, and administrators about what civic education is. Whatever its form, civic education must be a participatory process as opposed to a top-down directive that administrators impose on teachers, and that teachers, in a trickle-down effect, impose on students. Teaching English for and with communities might begin with brainstorming in a classroom about what civic education means and also what it could mean in the precise institutional context where that discussion is taking place. Interchange that is more formal is also possible. We, for example, recommend panel or town-hall meeting formats.

Talking and listening to each other takes time. Building a consensus takes even more time. However, we believe that the free and open exchange of ideas and its frustrations are essential parts of the recursive, participatory, and ongoing process that civic education is. Besides, we suspect that when members of an institution collaboratively construct an agenda for civic education contextualized according to their own concerns, they are more likely to see it to its fruition.

2. Identify institutional and individual values and make them explicit in practice

Teaching is by its nature value-laden. Educators, students, and institutions need to figure out what it is they value and find ways of making those values more unambiguous in practice. If, for example, teachers and students value tolerance, how is tolerance defined? More importantly, how is tolerance demonstrated in and outside of the classroom?

At a classroom level, the process of identifying values can be time-consuming. Like many others around the world, our center follows a commercial textbook series, and teachers are required to cover specific material to prepare students for assessments or examinations that they must pass before they may proceed to the next level. Additionally, due to the sizable population of students—some 2,000 monthly—trying to standardize classes at the same level has created anxiety. Despite these constraints, we believe teachers and students can always make time to discuss what is happening in their worlds and to think and rethink how those worlds might better reflect institutional and individuals values.

3. Return to dialogue

Dialogue is not a one-time event; it is a commitment to an open-ended process. We have consistently returned to what motivated us in the first place—asking questions about what sort of institution we want to be. A number of other centers for teaching English around the country have joined our forum both in person and virtually, through communication technologies. Teaching English for and with communities has not been contained in Chiclayo. Civic education, social responsibility, and pedagogies of change and social justice have recently been themes of national, regional, and local meetings. Volunteerism and service learning, literacy partnerships with K–12 public schools, professional forums for public school teachers, and curricula of critical inquiry have become a standard for binational centers throughout the country.

Teaching English for and with communities

In the complex societies of which we are a part, it is possible that English language teaching and learning move beyond the four skills that have long characterized what it is we do in our classrooms. In the words of Canagarajah (1999, 16), “Since everything that is taught already comes with values and ideologies that have implications for students’ social and ethical lives, teaching is always problematic.” We agree. Teaching is complicated. In contexts such as ours, teaching English as a foreign language seems, at times, even more so. Rather than shying away from the complexity that our work is, we argue that institutions like ours examine and celebrate the values that guide them—and we consider how those principles might be more fully realized. More than teaching English, institutions and English language classrooms can strive—both implicitly and explicitly—to mirror the societies to which we aspire.

The pilot project today

Discussions are rewarding. What is even more rewarding is when talk turns to action. Four short years later, the three initiatives we launched continue. Chiclayo Reads still brings young people together at the center on Saturdays—excited about languages and literacy, and about being together. But not long after the project began, it became plain to our student volunteers and the center administrator

that enrichment activities in English were only one piece of the project. The emphasis was therefore shifted to literacy in the children’s mother tongue—Spanish. Despite this shift in focus, our English students continue to volunteer—and the center acknowledges their work by giving them certificates and, often, full or partial scholarships to support their continued English language learning.

From the start, we counted our students and ourselves as our most valuable and most accessible resources. We then took into account how those human resources might be activated to meet some of the community’s various pressing needs. Although there has never been a strong tradition of volunteerism in our community, and some of us were skeptical that our students would rise to the occasion, many of them did. Their actions have taught us not to underestimate the willingness of young people to give of themselves.

In terms of the Summer Institute, nearly 300 public school teachers have completed the professional development sequence since its start. Originally two months long, the Institute runs all year long now, with two intensive months during the summer holidays and monthly meetings throughout the rest of the year. It currently represents one of the most sustained and large-scale efforts for K–12 teachers of English in the country and has been endorsed by the local branch of the Ministry of Education.

For the advanced curriculum, our teachers finally opted to create a stand-alone course that candidly addresses civic education through a lens of collaborative, critical inquiry. In this course, called Project Citizen, students and teachers identify issues that they care deeply about; together they research these issues, and they create action plans to address them. Finally, they present their action plans to institutional and local authorities.

Directions and destinations

Things have happened in our communities and in our world since we first began thinking and teaching like civic educators. We remain concerned about our teaching. We remain concerned about our institution. We remain concerned about the communities in which we live. It is true that Chiclayo Reads, the Institute, and Project Citizen have evolved in ways that make us proud. But there is more

to do—and much more that we could have done better.

The fact that we teach English in a country where indigenous languages have been threatened for centuries is yet another socio-cultural dimension that makes what we do all the more problematical. In our community, and in others like it around the world, being able to study English in a non-public institution is increasingly a marker of privilege and social distinction—in the same way that having an iPod or living in a certain neighborhood creates and sustains difference. We are acutely aware that although we work to keep student fees at a minimum, for many members of our community, our services are too expensive for them to participate. Thus, we are unsure of the short and long-term impact of what we have achieved. Often, we hesitate—full of doubts. We step back to consider the difference our small civic education program has made, and our optimism is held in check.

Tough problems continue to complicate our communities and the lives of all of us who live in them. These include, but are not limited to, racism, sexism, ageism, xenophobia, homophobia, unemployment, corruption, substance abuse and addiction, pollution, petty and violent crime, domestic violence, illiteracy, poverty, and intergenerational group-based inequality.

What is certain is that in addition to teaching English as a foreign language, even more, we teach students—individuals whom we care about deeply. Do they feel differently about their futures than they did some four years ago when we simply taught English? Do we feel differently about each other and ourselves? Sometimes, it seems that with every five steps forward, we have taken four backwards. Yet, teaching English for and with communities and the praxis it has engendered move us closer to a direction and destination that we can better imagine—if not fully reach.

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