

Service Learning and Community Engagement for English Classes

Service learning—sometimes known as community engagement—is a well-documented pedagogical approach with a long history, a strong theoretical basis, a specific ethos, and many passionate advocates. Yet it is conspicuously underused as a teaching method in the worldwide field of English language teaching. In this article, I argue that English teachers could gain significant benefits from using service learning more extensively, whatever their operational context may be: online, face-to-face, secondary school, college, language school, rural school, evening class, and so on.

Service learning is an established pedagogy that uses real-world experiences—beyond the classroom—to strengthen student motivation and enhance the meaningfulness of their learning. Advocates of learning by doing would see the basic principles of service learning as altogether natural and familiar to an extent, but service learning goes further because it insists on a sustained two-way relationship of exchange and cooperation with the community. It also invites a heightened and formalized process of reflection, and it encourages self-reflection by learners.

It also works. Research shows that students whose course included a service-learning component acquired better academic skills in the English language than students in courses with no service-learning element (Deans 2000; Prentice and Robinson 2010). In addition, participants in a service-learning activity gain a variety of nonacademic benefits: life skills, people skills, communication skills, organizing skills,

teamwork skills, negotiation skills, technical skills, and the essential work-world skill of taking responsibility for a real-world product.

One aim of this article is to stimulate readers' interest in trying service-learning projects, methods, and techniques with their own students. The article discusses service learning in general, then describes and analyzes two examples of real-world service-learning projects for English learners: the first in Macedonia and the second in Australia. Further examples of possible service-learning projects for an English class are suggested.

SERVICE LEARNING: DEFINITIONS

The extensive literature on service learning contains various definitions, but I define service learning as a two-way educational activity where students apply their classroom-acquired skills in a real community, taking real responsibility for a real product with real consequences. The learning is improved, and

so is the community, ideally in approximately equal measure.

To flesh out this definition, I will describe a service-learning project that meets all these criteria. In this project, Elwell and Bean (2001) describe a twelve-week English reading course focusing on John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men* with a diverse group of 28 students, migrants from 14 countries ranging in age from 18 to 50, at a community college in California. After six weeks of classroom instruction, Elwell organized a service-learning project in which the students went out to help struggling and unemployed itinerant/migrant farmworkers. The service component consisted of a collection drive to gather donations of food, child-care necessities, and school items for distribution to the community. Meanwhile, the learning of English was in the form of vocabulary acquisition, discussion skills, and oral expression skills, including reporting and presenting. In addition, the project helped the students' reading comprehension because it enabled them to relate to the situation of Steinbeck's characters in the novel.

DOES SERVICE LEARNING REALLY BENEFIT THE COMMUNITY?

There is no perfect community, and there is no human community that is without needs or problems. Also, every community has an internal structure and a set of hierarchies, comprising groups and subgroups that have needs and problems different from one another. At the same time, every community (unless it happens to be dying) has a youth generation, often full of potential, positive energy, and idealism—an often largely unused resource because the youth are typically in classrooms or engaged in homework exercises for most of their waking hours. Service learning is a way of harnessing this great but neglected resource and organizing its application to the needs and problems of the community.

In many instances, service learning has value to the community only in small ways, but small ways also count. Your students'

community-engagement project does not have to feed all the needy, regenerate all the damaged forests, and save all the wild koalas from extinction all at once.

You might be concerned at first that your efforts to engage your learners with groups or companies or organizations in the community will be an unwelcome distraction to those groups and will bring them little or nothing of value, given the inexperience of young students. I would argue that no service-learning project is ever truly a failure, especially if it is an English-focused project, because already the effort by the students to understand a community need and formulate a project plan to address it consolidates their language skills in practical ways; meanwhile, any action by students to reach out to be involved in community issues will benefit the community by establishing or reinforcing bonds that connect the generations. These are the baseline benefits that a service-learning project will inevitably provide, no matter how well the project ultimately succeeds in fulfilling its objectives.

SOME BENEFITS OF SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning offers the following benefits to both teachers and students:

- A service-learning project lets you use the community and its existing resources as your teaching and learning materials, so you do not need to acquire (or purchase) additional books, facilities, or equipment.
- Service learning gives you an abundant supply of class project ideas and lesson plans.
- Service-learning projects have strong motivating effects for both teachers and students because everyone is engaged in an activity with a real-world impact.
- Much of classroom learning is compartmentalized and abstract; service-learning projects break down this compartmentalization because in order to address a community need, students must

draw on a range of skills and integrate them in a concrete situation.

- Only rarely, if ever, do the skills taught in the school curriculum exactly match situations outside the classroom; however, students participating in a service-learning project have a chance to think and be flexible in applying their knowledge, and that prepares them for the job market and living in the world beyond the classroom.
- “By using service-learning projects, the professor imitates innovative business practices by promoting altruistic behaviors within the context of course activities. The more students are prepared for and know about business practices, the greater their competitive advantage will be in the workplace” (Tucker et al. 1998, 90). Although service learning does encourage a spirit of cooperation and helpfulness, it also develops the competitive spirit that can drive economic success throughout the world. Through service learning, a balance is achieved between these two apparent opposites.

TYPES OF SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS

There are as many service-learning projects as there are community needs. A bona fide community-engagement project must not only address a community need, but it must also be integrated with the knowledge and skills taught in the classroom. That connection is the difference between service learning and volunteering. If your project involves no clear application of classroom skills and knowledge, it is not a service-learning project, no matter how much it might contribute to solving a community problem (Anderson, Swick, and Yff 2001).

WHAT CONSTITUTES A COMMUNITY NEED?

This question may appear to be simple, but on reflection there are less-than-obvious aspects to it. The first issue is that of “How big?” Community problems are not necessarily

society-wide matters that require a large-scale project to tackle them. On the holistic principle that the whole community benefits if any subsection of it is improved, we can say that even a project that helps only one community group in only one way still meets a valid community need.

The second issue is that of “Whose need do we serve?” It would be wrong to suppose that service learning is only about helping the needy or marginalized people in the community. Although such groups do have needs, which perhaps are the easiest ones to spot and to tackle, the community does not consist only of its less fortunate citizens, and there is no requirement that service-learning projects focus only on their needs. A project, for instance, in which students help a startup company with writing persuasive promotional documents could help that company succeed, thus improving the community as a whole.

A third issue is that of “Who’s asking?” By this I mean, who gets to decide what the community’s needs are, and which ones should be addressed? Specifically, should it be the community or a group from the community outside the school’s gates that defines a need and requests a service-learning project to meet that need? The answer is, of course, no. You too are a member of the community, and so are your students. You do not have to wait for the community to come knocking and ask you to design and undertake a project. You can feel free to conceive a project yourself, but then you have to (1) identify the appropriate community group or partner for your project, (2) propose it to an appropriate entity, and (3) choose participants for the implementation of the project.

WHAT DOES “CLASSROOM INTEGRATION” MEAN?

Any service-learning project has to have *some* connection to the skills and knowledge acquired in the classroom, and ideally as much of a connection as possible; however, no service-learning project can ever be completely integrated with the curriculum. Why? Because the aim of service learning is

to give students opportunities to apply their academic knowledge to real-world situations, and real-world situations in practice never entirely match the theoretical and academic learning acquired in the school setting. In fact, that is the whole point. Service-learning projects do not aim to simply replicate what happens in the classroom: their value, precisely, is that they *differ* from what is taught in school, thus challenging students to adapt their skills and their thinking and apply them in new ways. Service learning is not meant to replace the curriculum that you follow in your school—it only needs to be a small part of the larger curriculum, giving students an opportunity to use, experience, and test their knowledge in a new context.

HOW TO DESIGN A SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT

There are two main approaches: need-based design and curriculum-based design. For a *need-based design*, you start by having students brainstorm the needs and problems in your community. Students may first have to do research, perhaps by talking to other community members, by doing searches in media reports, or (often best of all) by walking around and using their eyes. Once they identify a relevant need, you can proceed to include relevant learning objectives in the project design.

For example, imagine that you are a teacher in an imaginary city, Greenville. Everyone in Greenville speaks Greenish as his or her native language. There are problems in Greenville: unemployment, lack of books in schools, pollution (the streets are dirty). Now, let's say that you teach a class in Business English. At first, it may seem impossible that your students could ever use their knowledge of that subject to address any of those problems. Here is where you need to get creative. Let's pick one of the above problems: unemployment. Why are people unemployed? Because there aren't enough jobs. Why aren't there enough jobs? Because the businesses in Greenville aren't very successful. As a result of this lack of success, the businesses do not have enough money

to expand their operations and hire more workers. Why are businesses in Greenville not very successful? There are many reasons, but one is that they do not advertise their products effectively to markets outside the town. Why? Because their advertisements are in Greenish, and not many people outside Greenville speak Greenish.

Now, having followed this chain to this point, we can arrive at the conclusion that it would be good for Greenville if Greenville's businesses had advertising materials in an international language—namely, English. Now we have something that we and our students of Business English can help with. We can give our students monthly assignments to translate the advertising materials of various Greenville companies. As we have seen, this helps the community at large (if only a little bit); just as important, it lets our students apply their learning in a meaningful real-life context.

A *curriculum-based design*, meanwhile, is the other way around: you start by reviewing your curriculum and figuring out some way in which your students' knowledge could help to solve a community problem.

For example, let's go back to Greenville and imagine that you are a teacher of a rare foreign language—Reddish. This semester, you are studying Reddish culture with your advanced students. Only 15 people in Greenville speak Reddish, so at first glance it's hard to see how your students of Reddish could possibly be of use to the community. However, let's look more closely.

What can your students do with Reddish? They can speak Reddish with native Reddish speakers (like the 15 who live in Greenville). They can translate from Reddish into Greenish. They can translate from Greenish into Reddish. One thing you could do is get your students to speak to the native Reddish speakers in Greenville. They could ask the native Reddish speakers about their culture and their homeland. With their help, and using written sources in Reddish, the students

could design and produce, in Greenish, a guide to Reddish culture, and then they could distribute it to the Greenish-speaking history and language teachers throughout Greenville. You could task some of the students with translating the Reddish culture guidebook into English, too.

This project would help students from Greenville learn about cultures and values other than their own. More important, it would give your students authentic interaction with the language and culture they are studying. The key here is that you are moving from the specific curriculum to serving a wider community need, which in turn serves your learning objectives.

Note that neither of the above hypothetical projects directly addresses what would typically be thought of as a large social problem, but they are valid service-learning projects nonetheless.

My two actual projects, described below, were need-based designs rather than curriculum-based designs. The experience of carrying out these projects taught me that English really is the ideal subject for service learning, given its usefulness for all types of communication in worldwide settings. With regard to the curriculum-integration dimension, as we shall see, my students were using, applying, and practicing the full range of their acquired skills in written English for the purpose of completing their service-learning project. In my case, therefore, even though we started by identifying the need and only then reexamined the curriculum, we found there was scarcely any need to alter the curriculum to fit the identified community need. This shows that English is a special case: almost any service-learning project provides opportunities for students to apply—and improve—their English skills.

THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN A SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT

In what follows, I give an account of the steps I took in implementing a service-learning

project with my students in Macedonia. My project was implemented in an interesting cultural context: it addressed the community needs of persons with a disability in a minority Albanian community in a majority Slavic country. Thus, the special-needs learners who were the focus of the project constituted a minority of a minority—doubtless a strong test case for the challenges of achieving inclusiveness in education for all.

Essentially, the teacher is responsible for five things:

1. To identify the need and develop the project idea
2. To prepare the students (in the classroom)
3. To assign the tasks
4. To evaluate the output
5. To disseminate the results

1. Identifying the need and developing the project idea

As the teacher, you have to decide which project ideas are suitable for your curriculum, your students, and yourself. I had three things in mind when I set out to identify a suitable project idea: First, observably, there was little knowledge in the community about people with special needs, particularly with regard to their inclusion in the education system. Second, I wanted to expose my students to a body of literature that was not available in their own language and that they would not otherwise have had much reason to read. Third, I wanted students to use their classroom-acquired skills in English to engage with the community and help solve the above community problem (i.e., the general lack of understanding and the consequent low level of inclusion of persons with a disability).

2. Preparing the students (in the classroom)

The first task that I gave to students was to investigate this problem in the community—that is, to see more specifically what kinds

of problems the disabled students were facing. How were their parents and teachers addressing these problems? Who were the people in the community who were already working on disability issues? I asked each student to carry out his or her own research and write one page in English about his or her findings as an initial student-generated basis for conceptualizing the project.

Students reported that most of the help for the parents (both with education and with financial support) came from relatives living in Western Europe or the United States. This finding confirmed our initial hypothesis that little support was available from within the community itself. Teachers, when faced with disabled students, felt lost because they had received no training in how to adapt their pedagogy to accommodate these students. The only teachers who knew of appropriate teaching methods for integrating disabled students in the classroom were those who happened to be working with a Peace Corps volunteer.

The most important feedback from my students was the list they compiled of the few nongovernmental organizations that were trying to help persons with a disability. This list served as the basis for approaching these organizations to establish service-learning community partnerships with them.

3. Assigning the tasks

I asked students to design a poster in English, rescaled to be printed as a foldout brochure, highlighting one of the issues related to special needs—for example, on the topic “What is autism?” (directed to teachers) or on sports in relation to the physically disabled (directed to coaches). I told students to pick their own topic as long as it was related to special needs.

4. Evaluating the output

Service learning is not volunteerism, which means that, like any assignment, it will have value only if it contains a place for evaluation of student performance. In my case, I designed a sheet explaining the grading

criteria and the percentages of the final grade allocated to each aspect of the work. The criteria related to such aspects as substance and quality of content, design and creativity, organization and coherence, and correctness of spelling and grammar. For your own service-learning projects, of course, you will undoubtedly have a different range of needs and assessment priorities.

5. Disseminating the results

For two major reasons, it is important to disseminate the output of your students’ work as widely as possible after you have evaluated it. First, this is how you bring the benefits of the project out into the community. Second, from the standpoint of service-learning pedagogy, dissemination completes the cycle of the students’ learning; merely giving them a grade may be adequate in academic terms, but only by sending their work back outside the classroom walls and into the community will you make them feel the real-world consequence—and that, after all, is the goal of service learning.

At the end of the term, I organized the Fair Share conference, whose aim was to build awareness and showcase my students’ productive work and other related materials dedicated to people with special needs. Fair Share was a unique opportunity to meet, share experiences, and establish supportive contact with outside scholars, Peace Corps volunteers, students, parents, and decision makers from the region, and to propose future initiatives.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES OF SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS FOR ENGLISH CLASSES

Because of the rise of English as a world language, there are many service-learning projects students can carry out in your English classes, no matter where you teach. Designing a poster or brochure aiming to raise awareness about problems in the community is a popular type of project. The answer to the question “Why use English?” is always the same: it is the language of

international communication, so by making even some parts of their poster in English, your students will add a new dimension of accessibility to their message, allowing it to be received beyond borders. Large, bright, beautiful, colorful posters with high-impact content can be produced at low cost with simple and low-tech materials.

Another field of strong project ideas is the area of advocacy—for example, working with disadvantaged or minority groups in the community to give expression to their needs, their situations, and their cause by writing letters or submissions to local, national, or world bodies. Every community has divisions and inequalities, some more severe than others, but any community that is working to heal its divisions and reduce its inequalities is thereby made into a happier community. Your English learners will feel strongly engaged with their language learning if they are given an opportunity to use their skills to build a bridge between their local community and the international community with its powerful institutions (all of which use English for their operations).

The choice of a project aim must depend on your local community, so you and your students will need to begin by brainstorming the list of problems in their local area, along the lines of the Greenville example set out above. This in itself can be an enlightening process, as my final example shows.

FINAL ILLUSTRATION

A second service-learning project that I carried out involved a group of 12- and 13-year-old secondary school students in a vastly different context, Australia. Australian students in this age group are not accustomed to being given service-learning projects as school assignments, so when I asked them to brainstorm a list of community problems with a view to actually taking steps to do something about one such problem, my request was greeted with puzzlement. Their questions and expressions seemed to say, “Problems? What problems?”

We don’t have any problems. And even if we did, we are just kids; there’s nothing we could do about them.”

A 30-minute exercise in Socratic dialogue followed, however, and we teased out what is especially precious to these students about their country, what sort of lives they lead, and what sort of values they espouse. The class got the idea and arrived at an interesting problem list, with a clear winner at the top of the chart.

It turns out that these young people have a highly developed sense of care and responsibility for the natural environment. Australia has many unique and beautiful species of animals, both terrestrial and marine, but also a record of habitat loss and species extinction. Many native species are on the endangered list, including the iconic koala. Australia is also a maritime nation, with a warm sunny climate and 11,761 beaches along nearly 60,000 km of coastline, plus many beautiful islands such as the Whitsundays. My students know these beaches and islands well—better than they know the interior of the country, in fact. They listed marine pollution and the consequent poisoning of sea creatures, including seabirds, as their country’s number one problem.

In Step 1, the class identified its project idea and decided to reach out into the community with informative materials and a persuasive appeal.

In Step 2, preparation, one student put it this way: “You can’t do everything, so let’s pick just one of the many sources of marine pollution, the one that the largest number of citizens are guilty of, and let’s focus on that.” Another student said, “Yes, and it’s also the one that the largest number of people are unaware of.” It was agreed, then! Students researched the specific issue of plastic waste that ends up in the ocean. They then discussed modes and channels for persuasive interventions addressed to all citizens, and they formulated structures for persuasive presentation.

In Step 3, when work was assigned, each student was given a creative task to design and produce an advertisement warning people of the pollution and damage caused by single-use plastic drink bottles.

In Step 4, evaluation, student work was graded according to criteria similar to those described above for the persons-with-a-disability project, with students creating an advertisement rather than a poster/brochure.

In Step 5, the dissemination of results from this service-learning project is ongoing, as the student output has only just been completed at the time of this writing. Dissemination will be accomplished through three main avenues. There will be an eBook created by a team, including the teacher and two members of the class; the eBook will contain all the student work, plus supplementary graphics and an explanatory introduction. It will be distributed through the world's largest library of free eBooks and will be available to anyone interested in the topic. This is an example of *pull technology*, whereby the users (the readers) have to actively search for the item to “pull” it towards them.

In order to make a parallel use of “push” methods, whereby the item is pushed towards a more or less passive/receptive audience, the school is holding an Activity Day to which all parents, caregivers, teachers, local representatives, and members of the general public are invited via radio announcement, social media, and email. A display of the project output will be featured on a stand as one of the demonstrations of student work, and three members of the class will be on duty to speak to all comers about their project work. Finally, a selection of the advertisements will be published as if they were “real” ads in the school newspaper, which is circulated free to the school's community of friends and alumni; it is also downloadable from the school website.

One student, not content with the limitations of a still-image advertisement, decided instead to create a stop-motion animated cartoon warning people not to buy water in plastic bottles.

CONCLUSION

From my own experience and from a review of the research literature, including accounts of other authors' experience with their own projects, I conclude that service learning is one of the best available ways to achieve strong student engagement in their own learning. All teachers know how hard it can be to get students to engage fully—and to stay engaged—with what goes on in the confined space of an “academic” classroom; we also know that where student engagement is weak or poorly sustained, the learning suffers. Service learning gives learners the opportunity to use their English skills in a new and creative way by exploring issues in their communities, but without diluting or degrading the academic quality of the program.

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