Editor's Choice:
The Efficacy of Service-Learning for Community College ESL Students

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Higher education has been criticized for failing to address meaningful environmental, economic, and social problems as well as failing to prepare college graduates to meet the rigors of socially responsible citizenship (Readon, 1998). There is an expanding expectation on campus and in the community for higher education not only to focus on student learning and development but also to deepen the commitment of addressing human needs by resolving social problems (Jacoby, 1996). One such way to accomplish this is through community service-learning. Student community service and service-learning are powerful learning experiences that effect change and address America’s social problems (Berson, 1994). As a result of community service-learning, today’s college students are different from their predecessors, and as America’s social problems continue to increase, more students are seeking solutions to these problems through faculty-facilitated community service-learning projects (p.15).

Perhaps more than any other educational institution, the community college has a unique opportunity to be on the leading edge of this service-learning paradigm, since the community college’s existence is intertwined with a commitment to improve the communities that surround its campuses (Berson, 1994). In this paper, we will discuss a successful short-term community service-learning project that the first author facilitated for English as a Second Language (ESL) students in a reading class at the community college level and examine how the ESL students benefitted from participating in this community service-learning project.

Service-learning Defined

Service-learning can be defined as a pedagogy which involves aca-
ademic study linked to community service through assignments that require some sort of structured reflection so that each reinforces the other, with the benefits far exceeding those of service or learning by themselves (Mass-Weigert, 1998; Jacoby, 1996; Kinsley, 1994; Berson, 1994). By working on a community service project, students apply classroom knowledge to real-world experiences and use real-world experiences to inform classroom knowledge. This exchange encourages the students to become lifelong, active participants in the community (Berson, 1994). The hands-on experience also imparts knowledge to the students that they could not otherwise gain; hence, service-learning is an integration of service and learning, which creates synergy (Howard, 1998). According to Jacoby (1996), the hyphen in service-learning is symbolically representative of this symbiotic relationship. The goals of service and learning are of equal weight; thus, the hyphen is essential (p.6). Service-learning is also known as community-based learning, community learning (Mass-Weigert, 1998), and experiential learning, all of which involve students in a wide range of activities that are of benefit to others and use the experience generated to advance curriculum goals, such as gaining a deeper understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Waterman, 1997; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

History of Service-Learning in the U.S.

The concept of service-learning in the United States has an impressive history that includes the land grant university movement of the 1860s, John Dewey’s educational philosophy of the early 20th century, the Truman administration’s focus on higher education, and the campus and community-based organization initiatives of the 1960s’ Civil Rights Movement.

In the 1930s, John Dewey stressed that school and society were one and that higher education was intertwined with what he termed the “dilemmas and the perplexities of its time” (Arches et al., 1997, p.36). Along with Dewey, others have continued to emphasize that important advances in knowledge occur when educational institutions focus on key issues facing modern society.

During his tenure as president, Harry S Truman formed a citizen panel, the Truman Commission, to study and define the purpose of higher education. The Truman Commission stated that higher education should aid students in acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes to enable them
to live “rightfully and willfully in a free society” and that “without a broad liberal education, students are denied the opportunity to interact with the main ideas and events that are the source of any civilization” (Schaeffer-Hink & Brandell, 2000, p.870). The Truman Commission also concluded that American higher education should no longer be an institution for the elite but for the public at large (p.870).

Service-learning has been talked about in select higher educational circles for more than two decades, yet until recently has been largely ignored by academe as a whole. However, experiential educators have brought the current movement to life (Waterman, 1997). Service-learning programs today are merging two important historical American traditions: service to the community and the experiential approach to pedagogy (p.2).

**Criticism of Service-Learning**

Not all in academe are in favor of service-learning, however. Higher education is conflicted over research and social function of teaching. This conflict is representative of the clashes between competing views; “objective science versus social advocacy, classical versus utilitarian education, and critical thinking versus critical action” (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999, p.12). Some faculty fear that service-learning will dilute the academic rigor of a course. Others, conversely, maintain that service-learning can “intensify the level of intellectual effort students invest, drawing students closer to the course content that they are supposed to be studying in the first place” (Enos & Troppe, 1996, p.158).

**Benefits of Service-Learning**

To answer their critics who claim that service is not academic, service-learning advocates differentiate service-learning from non-academic service-learning from non-academic service by evoking the concept of reciprocity between server and served. In service-learning, those being served in the community do indeed teach lessons to the students who are serving them (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). It is through this reciprocity that students gain a greater sense of belonging and responsibility as members of a larger community (Jacoby, 1996). Service-learning can also remedy what Wallace (2000) calls educational alienation, which occurs at five levels: community (lack of connection between what the stu-
dents are learning and the challenges encountered by the wider society), disciplines (lack of connection between the different disciplines from which the students are learning), other learners (lack of connection between students communicating with their classmates), self (lack of connection between students’ passions and interests and what the school wants students to learn), and generativity (lack of connection between students’ selfish learning motives and a more comprehensive vision which benefits the overall community).

Among the frequently cited benefits that students participating in service-learning projects receive are the development of higher order thinking skills like analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Kinsley, 1994); development of friendships and a feeling of satisfaction (McCarthy, 1996); increased understanding of social problems, strengthening of a sense of social responsibility; heightened understanding of human difference and commonality; ability to work collaboratively and creatively; and possible development of career goals (Gose, 1997; Jacoby, 1996).

While Auerbach et al. “believe that students learn best when content is related to their own experiences” (1996, p.xv), Kinsley (1994) believes that any student can benefit from community service-learning. Community service-learning empowers students to become active citizens and builders of their own communities as well as of the larger society. One student who participated in a service-learning project is quoted by Arches et al. as saying, “I learned that there is so much that needs to be done to lift ourselves and our community out of the chaos of contemporary American life….I found that I had no role in my community to be a leader” (1997, p.38). Not only do many students continue to volunteer after their course is finished, but many seek careers in public service as a result (Roschelle, Turpin, & Elias, 2000).

The core values of service-learning programs include caring and compassion, responsibility and accountability, individuality and diversity, critical thinking and creativity, and respect for self, others, and the environment (Carver, 1997). With these values foregrounded, service-learning aids the student in “facing challenges, conquering fears, building on strengths, overcoming weaknesses, dealing with making mistakes, struggling, reflecting on experiences, and being exposed to constructive feedback” (p.146).
The Continuum of Service-Learning

Henry (1998) characterizes service-learning in higher education as experiences that can be represented on a linear continuum. At one end of the spectrum are co-curricular community service projects of short duration and class-related observational assignments. Moving toward the middle are volunteer service, service pay experience, and introduction to service courses. At the other end of the spectrum are advanced service-learning courses and in-depth internship experiences (p.84). At many colleges and universities, students are introduced to service-learning through participation in one-time or short-term experiences (McCarthy, 1996). Effective one-time and short-time service-learning experiences provide a balance of challenge and support for the students. Although in terms of depth and intensity, one-time or short-term service-learning experiences may be limited, they can nevertheless result in perceptual and attitudinal changes among participants and inspire them to participate in further community service experiences that are more long term.

Benefit to Faculty: Action Research

In addition, community service-learning projects offer college faculty members an opportunity to conduct action research, putting the power of research and theory development into their hands rather than into the hands of those not connected to their particular situation who may be creating theory in a distant ivory tower. Harkavy and Benson (1998) define action research as “actionable theory which is theory that is constructed, applied, tested, and revised in particular situations of practice” (p.18). Put another way, action research can be defined as teacher initiated classroom research which seeks to increase the teacher’s understanding of classroom teaching and learning and to bring about improvements in classroom practices (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992).

English as a Second Language (ESL) and Community Service-learning

Community service-learning is gaining momentum in secondary and higher education settings but has been used only sporadically in programs designed to increase proficiency in English among ESL college-level learners. While much has been written about the role of community service-learning and learning experiences for kindergarten through twelfth grade and college “mainstream” student populations, the ESL population is
largely absent from the literature. An extensive review of the literature for service-learning reveals a dearth of discussion on college-level ESL students participating in community service-learning projects. My study addresses this critical missing link.

**ESL Incorporates Service-Learning**

The setting in which the first author incorporated service-learning into an ESL course was a public two-year college in the Foothill-De Anza Community College District. Foothill College, located in Los Altos Hills, California, provides nearly 20,000 students with over 1,000 courses and services each quarter. The Foothill College ESL program offers approximately 30 ESL courses ranging from a low beginning-level to a highly advanced-level. Due to Foothill College's high standards, the ESL students can earn Title V degree applicable credit in many of their ESL courses.

For the spring 2000 quarter, 28 students (18 females and 10 males) were earning Title V degree applicable credit by taking the ESL intermediate level reading class that I was teaching during the daytime at Foothill College. The students had been in the U.S. for widely varying lengths of time, ranging from less than two months to more than a decade. Socio-economically, there was a great range as well: homeless and near penniless to living in custom homes and being very well-secured financially. The youngest student was 18 and the oldest was over 50; the average age was 25. The students had come to the U.S. from countries around the world: Brazil (1), Chile (1), China (2), Ethiopia (1), Guatemala (1), Iran (1), Israel (1), Japan (4), Mexico (8), Peru (2), Russia (1), South Korea (2), Thailand (1), and Ukraine (2).

Following Wallace's (2000) lead, I began the service-learning project by starting at the proficiency level where the learners were and then connecting their classroom learning with their service-learning experience. After having a very successful initial six weeks of the 12-week quarter, I felt confident that the students were ready for the challenge that I had orally and in writing "warned" them about at the beginning of the term. For the second half of the quarter, I had ambitious plans for the students. They were to read John Steinbeck's novel, *Of Mice and Men*, with the assistance of structured, reflective activities such as having in-class group discussions, writing out-of-class journal entries, screening the film based
on the book, listening to the book on audiotape, and completing homework from a skills book developed specifically for ESL students who were reading this particular novel. In addition, students were required to complete group research projects on topics such as the Great Depression in the U.S., the life of John Steinbeck, the history and geography of the Salinas Valley in Monterey County, California, and conditions of California itinerant and migrant workers. Once the research was complete, each student had to turn in an individual paper, participate in writing a designated portion of the group paper, and participate in delivering a group oral presentation (with relevant visual aids) in front of the class. Although this was a reading class, I was teaching it holistically: skills development in reading, writing, grammar, listening, speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary development, critical thinking, research techniques, and public presentation of self were all treated as equally important. I knew that the students were nervous about completing the course with a “good” grade since many of the 28 students had never before read a novel in English, used a computer, conducted research, written a formal research paper, given a formal presentation, or had a teacher as “demanding” as I was. I kept reassuring them that their fears were groundless.

I had not initially set out to do a service-learning project as I thought that the students would already be at their maximum stress load. However, I discovered a short-term service project that I felt, based on what I already knew about my students’ backgrounds, would connect the students more closely to their Steinbeck assignments. I predicted that by making the students aware of the plight of the migrant farmworkers currently living in semirural Porterville, California and having the students participate in a project that would help these workers, Steinbeck’s story and the novel’s cast of characters (itinerant farm workers in California’s rural Salinas Valley during the Great Depression) would come into greater focus. Such a project, I hoped, would also ease their fears about completing the course requirements.

The service project’s sponsors, Foothill College’s Service-Learning/ Volunteer Center working in conjunction with the Latino Heritage Month Committee, distributed a flier stating that Foothill College would be collecting supplies such as food, infant care necessities, and school items for children and adults in Porterville, a small town near Sacramento. This collection drive had been initiated by the National Farmworkers’ Service
Center in Porterville, one of the many organizations operating under the umbrella of the United Farm Workers of America (UFW). The drive was in response to the devastating freeze of 1998, which had destroyed much of the citrus crop in many areas of California, including Porterville, and devastated the economic resources of thousands of migrant workers and their families.

To introduce this project to my students, I made copies of the flier and distributed them to everyone in the class. Using the flier as authentic text, I had the students first silently read the flier and then take turns reading aloud. Afterwards, we talked about unknown vocabulary words, the main idea of the flier, the population we would be serving, and where Porterville was located. Besides learning that day about the geography and demographics of California and the meaning of words such as disabled, community, poor, boycott, industry, incredibly, implemented, donation, available, citrus, and foundation, the students began to understand why I was attempting to link the fictional hardships of Steinbeck’s Lenny and George to what the Porterville migrant farm workers had had to endure in reality. Additionally, the students became curious about how they could help the migrant workers of Porterville recover from their unfortunate circumstances.

**Conducting Action Research**

Realizing that the students were genuinely interested in participating in the supplies drive, I began to reflect upon how the inclusion of the community service-learning project would actually enhance the course and the specific ways in which these students could benefit from this particular short-term, on-campus, community service-learning project.

In order to explore the dynamics of my students’ response to this service-learning project and to study the role of community service-learning in relation to the academic learning experiences of these intermediate level ESL students systematically, I chose to employ ethnographic methods of inquiry including participant observation; informal, unstructured interviews; and a questionnaire. As a result of including the community service-learning component into the course, I hypothesized that the students would acquire more English language skills than would normally be anticipated, develop some understanding of the longstanding service ethic that exists in the U.S., become familiar with on-campus computer tech-
nology--particularly using the library’s on-line catalog and accessing, navigating, and retrieving information from the Internet--and learn how to interact with the larger community.

**My Fieldsite: The ESL Classroom and Beyond**

At the start of the quarter, I had habitually arrived on campus 30 minutes to 1 1/2 hours before the start of class to unlock the door and “open up” the classroom. As my class was the first one of the day in that room, I had the luxury of leisurely writing the day’s agenda and other items (definitions, exercises, notes, pop quizzes, quotes for the day) on the chalkboard before class. Also, the extra time allowed me to have more time to assist the students who wanted one-on-one mentoring sessions with me before class started. While waiting to work with me, students would also use this time to study or socialize with their classmates. This unhurried and personalized learning and social time seemed to be welcomed by the students. It was frequently the case that all 28 students were in class well before the official start time. Tardiness was rarely an issue. It was during this pre-class time on the day following the students’ introduction to the service-learning project that I began participant observation and informal, unstructured interviews.

In this particular pre-class period, a student from China brought in a decorative bag filled with Top Ramen for the people of Porterville, while a student from Mexico had brought in a 10-pound bag of rice and some cans of refried beans. These two students initiated a conversation, which eventually spread to the entire class, about cultural likes and dislikes regarding food. This rich pre-class discussion was an excellent manner in which to lead into *Of Mice and Men* for that class period. We were at the point in the novel where Lenny and George had to share their limited food resources of three can of beans and were having an argument because of Lenny’s innocuous yet annoying statement that he liked ketchup, which they did not have, with beans.

I continued participant observation and informal, unstructured interviews throughout the rest of the six weeks before, during, and after class; during office hours; by email and telephone when students had questions or needed clarification and could not find me on campus; when giving the students tours of campus student support centers; and when
taking the students to the library to facilitate their learning how to initiate research by using the library's computers.

Near the end of the quarter, I asked the students to complete a nine-item questionnaire related to the community service-learning project and the *Of Mice and Men* activities. The questions I asked were the following: How did participating in the project benefit you? Did you learn any English? Did you learn about American culture? Did you become closer to your classmates as a result of this project? Did participating in the project make you feel part of a community? Did the project help you learn how you can help others? Would you like to be involved in something like this again? Would you like to organize your own community service-learning projects? Do you feel that reading *Of Mice and Men*, doing research reports and presentations, and watching the movie based on *Of Mice and Men* was helpful to your understanding of the people we helped in the community service-learning project?

At first glance, the questionnaire may have seemed overly simplistic for intermediate level community college ESL students, as eight of the nine questions required only a yes or no short response. However, I had structured the questions purposely in this fashion as I had explained to the students that in answering the questionnaire they were to practice what we had learned in class throughout the quarter about answering in the expanded form, providing explanations and examples to support short yes or no responses.

Additionally, in asking these particular questions, I was following the ORID Model of Inquiry (Cleary, 1997, pp.26-27): Objective – What did the students hear, see, and do? Reflective – How did it feel? Interpretive – What did they learn? Decisional – How would they incorporate this experience into a new paradigm?

**Research Findings**

This combination of participant observation, interviews, and questionnaire yielded data confirming that the students had greatly benefitted from the infusion of community service-learning into the course curriculum.

Through their reading of Steinbeck’s novel and related reflective academic activities, the students had become fascinated by the situation of California’s farmworkers, seeing it as an extension of a historical eco-
onomic situation that has endured since Steinbeck’s time, a hidden part of the California economy that, unless one is familiar with the rural areas of California, one might not be aware of at all. Although some of the Latino students in the class had migrant worker connections through family or friends and were acutely aware of the migrant workers’ plight in the U.S. hinterland, other students had no knowledge that migrant workers in rural areas of America even existed. However, once they learned of the workers’ existence, the non-Latino students were able to empathize with the rural migrant workers’ situation. For instance, Marianna (from Russia) explained, “Working on the farm is very hard. A freeze or flood is a misfortune. I lived in Russia, so I know what cold means. So, I know what hunger means.”

The plight of the Porterville migrant workers personalized Steinbeck’s story for the students. Rhode (Guatemala) felt that “we should respect the farmer. We are all the same, only with different language and skin color. Nevertheless, this should never stand in the way of respecting humanity.” The students also became zealous in their efforts to collect school, infant care, and food supplies. During one class session, while on our way to a tour of the campus tutorial center, I showed the students the three locations where they could drop off their supplies. Later, however, we collectively decided to store the supplies in our classroom until all of the students had had a chance to bring in their contributions. What resulted was astounding. The amount of supplies gathered by this one class was greater than that gathered by the rest of the college’s entire student body. This occurrence prompted a co-coordinator from Foothill College’s Puente Program, a program designed to assist minority, low-income, first-generation college, and ESL students succeed in college, to visit my classroom and, as an expression of gratitude, arrange a date for the students and me to meet for a group photograph in a central location on campus. It was not until we had gathered for the photography session, posing with some of the supplies we had collected and with United Farm Workers banners, that the students truly realized the tremendous contribution they had made to the farmworkers, to the school, to themselves, and to each other.

Academically, these students had surpassed my highest expectations. In a matter of weeks, not only had they greatly improved their ability to speak, listen, read, and write in English, they had also learned
how to conduct meaningful library research. Claudia (Peru) stated that while doing research form the group project, she and her cohort had gone to the campus library three times. Not completely satisfied with the resources she had located, Claudia felt she owed it to the people of Porterville and to people like Steinbeck’s characters Lenny and George to find more materials and was thus compelled to go to “another library to check out another book and also look at the Internet.” This action required Claudia to use technology that, before undertaking the academic research project and becoming involved in the community service-learning project, she had not had the courage to use.

The students also learned how to give professional, cohesive group presentations. The high standard they set for their research presentations was a direct result of the community service-learning project involvement. Before the community service-learning project involvement, the students were dreading the group research project since most of the students had negative feelings about group projects in general. That changed with the students’ opportunities to come together for a common social cause. Carol (Peru) wrote that “participating in this project made me feel part of the community because I was so involved in the subject that I felt that I was part of it....Working as a group we can achieve more....We share and collect ideas. Then we select the best ones.”

In addition, a group ethos developed in the class that had not existed before, and students began to see themselves as valuable, contributing members of society who, even as mere students with less than fluent English skills, could make tangible, much needed contributions to society. Here is a sampling of the effects of this short-term community service-learning project: Enrique (Mexico) offered, “the project made me understand more clearly that there are people who need help. By volunteering my time to help these people, I discovered a way to help others in the future.” Li-Ping (China) stated that by “helping these people now, when I have difficulties, people will help me.” Ana (Mexico) was so excited about this project that she wanted to get her daughter involved in a similar project. Hae Jue (South Korea) was motivated to start helping other groups now that she knew that this type of philanthropy was not only acceptable but encouraged in the U.S. Bitew (Ethiopia) began to make ambitious plans to start his own nongovernmental organization.
Conclusion

To apply the service ethic successfully in a pluralistic nation such as the U.S., an emphasis must be placed on the genuine value of each human being, with moral consideration extended to all groups and a willingness to act in the interest of others (LeSourd, 1997). These particular ESL community college students did just that. They saw this community service-learning project not as an isolated academic exercise but as a project that possessed real-world relevance. Bitew shared with me that he thought, “American love, hope, and compassion are the kinds of gifts you don’t have to put in boxes or wrap with ribbon.” He went on to say that, “participation in community involvement helps pupils develop a strong sense of duty and responsibility as a human being.”

Based on my observations and the student’s reports, this short-term community service-learning project was highly beneficial on several levels: academic, personal, and societal. Should more community college ESL instructors and departments begin to involve their ESL students in community service-learning projects regularly, perhaps all involved will experience the high degree of success that society is looking to higher education to provide.

Validation for having infused the community service-learning project into my course came to me with a vague yet profound stirring comment from a Japanese student who wrote that as a result of participating in the community service-learning project, he “grew up a little bit.” With statements such as Shuhei’s confirmation echoing in my mind, I feel confident that service-learning holds even greater potential for community college ESL students.

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