Teaching More Than English: Connecting ESL Students to Their Community Through Service Learning

While service learning has long been recognized as a powerful method for engaging students, Ms. Russell has discovered that it is particularly well suited to the learning and social needs of ESL students. Indeed, it can be the key to making them feel more at home in their school and community while reinforcing the language skills they learn in the classroom.

By Natalie M. Russell

In my years as an ESL (English as a second language) teacher, I have observed that language and cultural differences often cause ESL students to feel alienated from their school and their community. As a result, they tend to make friends primarily within their own ESL classes and avoid interacting with mainstream students and getting involved in school activities.

After integrating into my curriculum a yearlong service-learning project that required the students to interact with the surrounding community, I found that my ESL students were more connected to other students in the school and felt more appreciated and accepted within the community. I continue to use service learning in my ESL curriculum and recommend it highly because it proved effective both in connecting the students to the school and community and in reinforcing the students’ language skills in real-world settings.

What is service learning? The term refers to a teaching method that seeks to enrich learning by “engaging students in meaningful service to their schools and communities.” The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse points out that this goal is accomplished by attaching service tasks to structured activities that “link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery,” and a better understanding of values, skills, and knowledge. In other words, students not only learn during service-learning activities, but they also reflect on their service and its value to the community. This reflection helps build a sense of civic responsibility and caring for others.

The first year that I decided to try service learning with ESL students, I was teaching in a small, rural school district in central Nebraska. The district had an extensive ESL population, primarily because of the large number of immigrants who worked at the local meat-packing plant. The student population of the high school in which I taught was approximately 60% Hispanic, and my ESL classes that year were 100% Hispanic. In deciding what our service project would be, my students concluded that the community’s primary problem was the language barrier that divided the immigrants from the local population. While Spanish/English dictionaries were available for purchase in town, Spanish/English phrasebooks were not. Therefore, the class decided to create a short, community-specific Spanish/English phrasebook and distribute it free of charge in the community.

Because service learning is fundamentally student-centered learning, it generates many opportunities for students to develop leadership and problem-solving skills. Selecting and defining our project offered students a chance to take the initiative in a school project, and, on the way to completion, they also developed their skills in listening, research, building relationships, and communicating diplomatically.

While they were involved in our phrasebook project, my students stopped learning and taking direction pas-
sively and began to take an active role in their education. They divided themselves into groups with group leaders and assigned different tasks to each group. They also created and distributed a questionnaire in English and Spanish to seek input from community members as to what should be included in the phrasebook. Once the students made their final decisions on the content, some of the groups began writing specific sections (e.g., “Going to the Doctor”), while others focused on contacting local businesses for help or donations for printing and binding expenses.

Once the book seemed complete, I enlisted the help of two other teachers who were willing to allow their English and Spanish classes to work with my students on revising, correcting, and proofreading their work before it was sent to a local print shop. All of these activities promoted my ESL students’ development of leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills.

In working and communicating with businesses, community members, and other students in the school, my students not only developed new relationships but improved their abilities in English as well. This kind of collaborative learning is a common outcome of service learning. When students engage in service learning, they can “recall and apply more of what they learn than in traditional content-based and faculty-centered curriculum” because they are involved in activities that are hands-on and offer meaningful real-life experiences. Moreover, service learning allows students to address complex problems in complex settings, and, as in most of life, there are no right answers in the back of the book. While the language in the phrasebook may have been simple and contrived, the conversations that took place between the English and Spanish students and my ESL students as they worked on the project were anything but simple. And finally, in communicating with community members, my students had an opportunity to have authentic experiences with native speakers outside the classroom and the school.

Because my students were using their education in what they felt was a meaningful way, they were also more highly motivated to learn. Any teacher will tell you that a lack of student motivation may be the most important factor in limiting teachers’ effectiveness; service learning can change that. Service learning motivates students because it enables them to address problems they care about outside of the classroom. It provides answers to the question “Why do we have to learn this?” Indeed, my students were motivated enough by our project to learn more than the English skills I had planned for in my curriculum. They actually asked me to create materials to teach them more English, so they could do a better job with their project.

Of all the components of service learning, however, reflection probably plays the most vital role in making the learning successful. Reflection allows students to “address their concerns, challenge their preconceptions, and connect their sense of self with others.” The type of reflection students engage in with regard to service learning represents one of the highest levels of cognitive learning. Unfortunately, ESL students are not often asked to function on this level. My students reflected on their project through journaling and class discussions. In their reflections, they examined their desire to “belong” in the community and identified ways in which they could continue to take part, such as by joining sports teams, clubs, and other organizations. In addition, they realized that through their service activity, they now felt some attachment toward and ownership of the community in which they lived.

Since we finished our service-learning project, many of my students have continued to work within their community. Several of them have since joined school groups or local organizations that are dedicated to community service. And some individual students have chosen to create service projects of their own, such as organizing recycling programs at the school and at local businesses.

Regardless of what they have chosen to do since our project ended, during our work together my ESL students learned actively and engaged in the class curriculum, used what they learned in meaningful ways, and finally developed a better connection to the community in which they lived. Because of the success of our first service-learning project, I have since continued to integrate service learning into my curriculum in any way I can — be it having students teach senior citizens how to use a computer or having them partner with younger children to read aloud to them. Service learning does more than help students learn and improve academically; it also teaches them to reach out to others, to take pride in and ownership of their community, and to learn and improve as human beings.

5. Ibid., p. 19.