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Reaching Beyond Borders Through Service Learning

Terri M. Carney

Implementing a service learning pedagogy in university Spanish programs around the country has great potential for three target groups of participants: Latino students in public school English as a second language (ESL) programs, university students studying Spanish, and the university Spanish professors who teach them. The public schools in many U.S. cities and towns are unable to handle the rapidly growing population of Spanish-speaking ESL students, especially when they are already struggling to maintain academic standards for their English-speaking students. One Spanish professor with one Service Learning in Spanish course can provide the public schools with a consistent flow of regular tutors for the academic year. In our Butler University course, this translated into about 400 hr of tutoring for Latino students in one semester. Although the benefits to Latino children and to the community's public schools are the most obvious, they are enhanced when one considers the benefits to the other two participant groups. The university students who engage in the Service Learning in Spanish course reap many rewards as well. They improve their Spanish skills more rapidly, experience increased motivation in their study of the language and cultures, and report an increased appreciation for the complexities surrounding the Latino population in the United States. Finally, the Spanish professor who struggles to find ways to engage with real-world social problems from within the confines of a narrow disciplinary specialty area can embrace this opportunity as a public intellectual.

In Fall of 2001, I taught the first service learning course for Butler University's Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Department: SP300: Service Learning in Spanish. I designed and proposed the course after conducting several experimental service learning-based independent studies. This new course has established a partnership between our university Spanish program and the ESL tutor room at the nearby Crispus Attucks Middle School, which works with about 40 Latino students with little or no English skills. Each semester, up to 20 students work 2 to 3 hr a week with these students as academic tutors and mentors. The academic goal of our university course is to increase fluency in Spanish skills while fostering cultural awareness and an appreciation for the complex social issues surrounding Latino immigration and education. To encourage students to frame their community experience in meaningful ways, we come together as a class once a week (for 75 min) in an academic environment for discussions and student presentations, which provide opportunity to refine communicative abilities in Spanish. I hope to further deepen the students' engagement with their community experience through the use of reflection journals (in the target language) and selected readings on the topic of Latinos in the United States:

The ESL teacher was absent one day and I was alone with the students. They didn't know what to think of me. They were testing my knowledge in Spanish ... curse words, trying to shock me. One student asked me, "*¿Te gustan los mexicanos ?*" I said that I did and asked him why he would ask that question. He replied, suspiciously asking, "*Nunca dices*" "fucking Mexicans?" Some people say that.

This was a quote from a reflection journal written by one of my students. It was a question asked of him by a Mexican student in the ESL class he works with, and it made my student reflect on the myriad of issues that emanate from that one question: racism, cultural difference, stereotypes, immigration, assimilation, alienation. These were issues he associated with academic readings and theoretical classroom discussions in political science courses. Now, suddenly they became more intricate, more nuanced when seen on the local level and through the eyes of particular individuals.

The learning objectives of my course are comparable to other 300-level Spanish skills courses at Butler University. At this level, students are expected to synthesize 2 years of Spanish language classes (grammar, vocabulary, cultural knowledge) as they continue to develop increasingly sophisticated mastery of all four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Unlike other skills courses that emphasize one skill over others (e.g., Spanish for Oral Communication, Spanish for Written Communication), this skills course takes a more holistic approach by affording equal attention to all the communication skills. An important goal of the course is to increase student awareness of the Latino experience in the United States and to encourage them to explore the social, political, cultural, and economic realities that shape this community and its place in the United States.

This course is a three-credit course for students who already have completed the language requirement and are at a proficient level of Spanish. Service learning in Spanish will improve on the current model of skills classes by providing students with an authentic context in which to practice the "nuts and bolts" of the language. In our

department (as in many), we divide the 300-level courses into two categories: skills and content. The skills courses focus on either conversation or written and prepare the student to move on to classes that focus on content: history, literature, culture, or film, for example. These content classes assume the skills to be transparent. In the skills courses, much like in the lower language classes, the teacher continually invents "realistic" contexts in which students can meaningfully communicate new information so as to avoid rote drilling of linguistic structures that results when students feel disconnected from the material in the textbook. Combining service in the Latino community and engaging in meaningful interaction with native Spanish speakers about real social and political debates relevant to the target culture allows the teacher to spend time on reflection and discussion with students who already are engaged in dialogue with real people in real situations.

Recent studies on service learning have shown that students who participate in such courses significantly increase their sense of civic responsibility. Additionally, I have found in the past year and a half that students in my service learning course progress in their Spanish skills at a more accelerated rate than those students in my non-service learning skills course. The students working with the Latino students are more motivated to communicate in Spanish in their conversation and in their journals.

A vital component of the successful service learning experience is reflection. The weekly journal is by far the most important tool for making potential volunteerism into the true mutual exchange undergirding the service learning ideology. When students are able to reflect on their work in the community, they are able to move beyond the disconnected mode of volunteerism to discover valuable lessons, both academic and personal. In the reflection journals I have read this semester, I have evidence of the following processes associated with the service learning experience:

1. Awareness of social problems and the need for community involvement to solve them.
2. A change in student perception of the "immigrant problem" as something complex and irreducible to quick-fixes.
3. Self-discovery, which includes self-doubt, self-reflection, self-assurance, and self-worth.
4. Application of disciplinary knowledge in meaningful contexts: students testing academic ideas/terms/knowledge in the "messy" real world.
5. Development of problem-solving initiative (agency).
6. Respect for others not as different or needy but as fellow human beings negotiating a path within a particular set of circumstances.

Service learning encourages meaningful engagement between the academic work of university scholars (both professors and students) and the communities in which they live and work. It essentially challenges the long-held notion of the university as an "ivory tower," far removed from the concerns of the real world and dedicated to the preservation of narrowly focused and discrete academic disciplines that are greedily protected. Most important, perhaps, service learning speaks to the duty of the democratic university to produce active and morally responsible citizens.

I fell in love with service learning right away, intuitively drawn to its premises and alternative teaching paradigm. It was only later I realized that its tenets, which include fostering empathy, self-understanding, honesty, responsibility, collaborative thinking, and creating a "fabric of connectedness" dovetailed with the two burning questions I was trying to answer for myself through my somewhat esoteric literary criticism scholarship. The artificial borders separating my teaching from my research were dissolving: Worlds were colliding and it felt great. Three recurring questions in my scholarship have been the following:

1. What is the role of the intellectual in contemporary society?
2. How can we develop a viable model for human agency and social responsibility in the wake of the fragmentation and decentering of the human being effected by much poststructuralist thinking?
3. How can we foster a concern for the "OTHER"?

Ironically, I had to travel to the heights of the ivory tower under the tutelage of some of the most renowned scholars in Spanish literature (for some reason concentrated in Kansas) before I could articulate these burning questions. While in the tower, I read obscure and difficult novels by Luis Goytisolo, an author who, I grew to understand, was grappling with these very issues in his own cultural context. He was questioning the role of the Spanish intellectual after the Franco dictatorship, trying to carve out a new model of human agency for a Spanish people who had spent nearly 40 years under an oppressive dictatorship and now faced the freedom and the responsibility of assuming an active, participatory role in their own government. I realized that these burning issues

were my own: What is my role as an intellectual in our society? How can I become a more active, participatory citizen agent within my role as professor and literary scholar? I needed to find answers to these questions for myself to feel integrated and connected. The mission of service learning has helped me forge a meaningful link between my literary scholarship and my desire to make a difference in the real world I share with my local community.

Working with students in these courses, I have had the privilege of glimpsing the delicate yet vital interface that connects intellectual development and moral growth. I have seen students reaching to incorporate more sophisticated grammar and syntax into their journal entries, not because I assigned a particular grammar point but because they have the desire to communicate on deeper levels about enriching, often emotional experiences and therefore need to push their Spanish skills further. Witnessing the power of service learning pedagogy to motivate the students to pursue high academic goals is an enlightening experience that leads one to wonder about the many ways we might rethink our current model of higher education.

The benefits outlined in this article can be understood as ways to work beyond borders of all kinds: linguistic, academic, personal, cultural, and political, for example. In short, the successes of the service learning pedagogy are predicated on our willingness to rethink the borders that contain, limit, and isolate us as students, professors, and human beings.