Learning Service and Service-Learning in Turbulent Times

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Abstract
Times are tough. Recovery from the worst recession in 80 years is too slow. While a coalescence of political, social, and economic pressures can push people and institutions to consider disengaging from their communities, in this talk I will argue for the opposite: Service can and should be part of the solution to the most pressing problems in society today. Presenting snapshots of service projects involving English Language Learners, I will also suggest that TESOL educators and their students can gain critical civic literacy skills by inverting the term service-learning and considering what it means to learn service.

Recession as Context for Service-Learning
The drum roll of bad news on the economy is discouraging for many. Americans have suffered a record decline in wealth in recent years as home values tumbled, according to the Federal Reserve. Between 2007 and 2010, the median family’s net worth dropped 38.8%, the biggest drop in net worth since the Fed started tracking this metric in 1989. The national unemployment rate is 8.1%, down over 1% in the last year, but still high. Here in Michigan the unemployment rate is 9.4%. California, Rhode Island, and Nevada have double digit rates. And these figures do not include the million or so “discouraged workers” who looked for a job recently and gave up because they couldn’t find one. Most of us know someone who has been negatively affected by the economic downturn. Some of you may have seen the confusing list of institutional affiliations in my biography of the conference Web site. This is because I unexpectedly lost my job recently too; I know the personal and social trauma unemployment can create.

If the economic news weren’t bad enough, other bad news from around the world looms on the horizon: global warming, war, endemic hunger and poverty, and deteriorating health care that costs more and reaches fewer. The list of issues in need of immediate attention keeps growing and can seem overwhelming at times. Without knowing how to help, this can lead to apathy and despair in individuals, and cause institutions to disengage from the communities they are meant to serve. Cutbacks in government assistance and social programs might suggest service is optional, an extra-curricular activity undertaken when time and resources allow. However, the opposite is actually true, as community needs have only increased since the economic downturn, making the services our students provide that much more valuable (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012).

Service-learning can and should be part of the solution to the most pressing problems in the world today. Students today have remarkably high levels of personal agency (Wurr, 2011). They want to help, but need tools to act on their good intentions. Service-learning helps turn apathy into empowerment for students.

TESOL teachers are an important part of the solution to these problems since non-native English speakers (NNS) now form the majority of people in the world today. To
paraphrase Paulo Freire’s notion of critical pedagogy, he suggests that teachers are as powerful as they see themselves to be. By the way, how many of you know who coined the phrase quoted at the top of the screen, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem”? Eldridge Cleaver is often credited with coining the phrase, but it was actually Charles Rosner, a renowned advertiser and marketer who wrote it for VISTA as a recruitment slogan in 1967. VISTA stands for Volunteers in Service to America and is the oldest branch of the AmeriCorps family. It remains true to its original mission of reducing poverty in America today, so it is appropriate to honor that mission as we consider ways to engage students and communities.

How do we help students acquire civic literacy skills? If we invert “service learning” to “learning service,” we emphasize the learning in service-learning while recognizing that community service and volunteerism may be new concepts for many ELLs. To help students learn these skills, we need to build their schema on service. When we learn service, we view service as “living text,” encouraging a student-centered, ethnographic approach to research and writing, and the community as a source of knowledge and a place for learning much like a printed book or the library. Indeed, pairing printed and living texts in community-based research can provide a powerful source for learning through the dissonance created by the theory and praxis often found in “counter-texts” (Dubinsky, Welch, & Wurr, 2012; Wurr, 2007).

“Learning service” also suggests the need to scaffold service-learning activities for ELLs, matching task complexity with learner proficiencies and abilities. As a teacher, I have become more aware of the need to scaffold service-learning experiences as more and more students from American high schools come to college with significant prior volunteer experiences, while international students are often encountering community service for the first time in my classroom. As an administrator, I appreciate the value of sequencing assignments and courses in such a way so that skills build over time, so that some courses open to all engage students in limited one-day group service projects while more advanced capstone courses might engage students in a semester-long project that they analyze from multiple disciplinary lenses, for example.

“Learning service” suggests the need to scaffold service-learning activities for ELLs and match task complexity with learner proficiencies and abilities. Mary Kirlin (2003) identifies the underlying skills necessary for civic engagement. For example, monitoring public events and issues requires students to understand distinctions between three sectors of society: public, nonprofit, and private; understand context for events and issues (e.g., what happened and why); and have the capacity to acquire and thoughtfully review the news by reading the local newspaper. Asking students to deliberate about public policy issues requires them to think critically about the issues and understand them from multiple perspectives. Interacting with other citizens to promote personal and common interests requires the ability to understand democratic society and collective decision making as the norm; articulate individual perspectives and interests; work with others to define common objectives; create and follow a work plan to accomplish a goal. Influencing policy decisions on public issues necessitates identifying decision makers and institutions and understanding appropriate vehicles for influencing decisions. In each example, teachers need to identify separate goals for content learning and service.

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1 I am indebted to Marilynne Boyle-Baise (2007) for pointing out the pedagogical utility of this linguistic trick.
Models for “Learning Service”

Several theoretical models provide additional guidance on ways for students to learn service. The diversity of service types allows a better fit for diverse learners than a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Edward Zlotowski (1998) describes three levels of reflection -- the social, personal, and discipline-specific dimensions to service -- that can be explored usefully in reflection activities. On one level, students can consider the social dimensions of service by investigating social systems and issues, in looking at the macro-level causes of homelessness, for example. The interaction of the individual in society is also worth investigating, so students can explore their own personal values and beliefs in relation to service. Finally, students can also explore discipline-specific issues raised by their service project. Exploiting the technical dimensions of service makes the course a better course by providing students with hands-on applications of course concepts.

It is worth noting in passing that the U.S. Department of State’s Foreign Language exam follows a very similar progression from simple to more complex topics. In interviews, a candidate might initially be asked about their personal interests and hobbies before being asked about current issues and events in the news that related to the target language and culture. Finally, interviewers might ask about a candidate’s major and how his or her educational background has prepared him or her for the job.

Tom Dean’s (1999) description of the different kinds of writing that can accompany various service projects remains one of the most practical and useful models in the field today. His dissertation hangs on just three prepositions, describing projects in which students write about, for, or with community partners. Drawing on John Dewey’s notion that experience is the best teacher, writing about service produces academic texts such as reports and reflective essays. This contrasts with projects in which students write for community partners by producing technical documents such as Web sites, three-panel brochures, public service announcements, or in more advanced courses, grant applications. Writing for community partners draws on Freirean notions of critical literacy by using language to promote social change. Finally, students can engage in collaborative writing projects or oral history projects with community partners, while drawing on Lev Vygotsky’s theories of social interactionism in the process.

Dan Butin (2006) offers another service-learning typology that tracks well with historical developments in applied linguistics. Applied to service-learning in TESOL, Butin’s technical dimension would emphasize student learning outcomes, while the cultural dimension would emphasize multiculturalism and civic literacy more. If teachers adopt Butin’s post-structuralist view of service-learning, they would emphasize social change and the inherent power dynamics between server and served. The fourth view of service-learning Butin offers is one TESOL practitioners have not readily accepted in the past, a post-modern/post-structuralist view that emphasizes positionality and self-awareness. In her discussion of Butin’s typology, Marilynn Boyle-Baise (2007) notes how the categories illustrate that service-learning is not homogenous service. It is undertaken by different people for different purposes (and by the same people for different purposes at different times).

One final model for civic engagement worth considering is the Social Change Wheel: Models of Community Involvement developed by Minnesota Campus Compact (1996/2011). The social change wheel outlines a dozen different forms of community
involvement – from direct action service projects such as serving food at a soup kitchen to indirect service projects that build capacity through advocacy (e.g., speaking to community groups about homelessness) and community building (e.g., planting a community garden or organizing a block party). Political activities run the same continuum of direct to indirect actions in the model. Organizing voter registration drives or participating in a Take-Back-the-Night march are examples of more direct political actions while practicing socially responsible behaviors such as taking public transit or assisting with community economic development projects such as completing an asset map or offering job skills workshops are examples of indirect political actions. As the introduction to the model on YouTube notes, “Achieving social change requires a variety of complimentary strategies” (Minnesota Campus Compact, 2011).

For educators, I believe The Social Change Wheel serves as a reminder that there are many different ways to serve one’s community; some may be more appropriate or viable at different times in one’s life, and so the more students are made aware of the options, the better they will be able to remain engaged with their communities over time. And for TESOL educators, the Social Change Wheel reminds us that diverse learners benefit from diverse service options. There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to serving for a better world.

If these theoretical models were not enough to inspire you to consider ways of incorporating service-learning into the courses you teach and the programs you administer, then let me share with you some examples of different types of service-learning projects involving English Language Learners that appear in the emerging professional literature on the subject. We’ll start with examples of K-12 and university collaborations, then move on to community colleges and higher education in the U.S. and abroad. My goal in reviewing these case studies with you is to illustrate the rich diversity in service-learning projects as well as the diversity of the ELL populations with which we work.

Teacher Education has always been well represented in the service-learning literature. Typically, university pre-service teachers tutor K-12 and adult ELLs (Hutchinson, 2011; Miller & Gonzalez, 2009; Moore, in press). In doing so, pre-service teachers gain experience with ELLs, a population many fear due to their lack of TESOL knowledge. For example, Jesse Moore’s forthcoming study charts a shift in TESOL students’ perceptions of English language learners as the TESOL students move from identifying ELLs as an “other” with whom they would have “encounters” in the discrete spaces of ESL classrooms to seeing ELLs as potential students in their future content classes. With this familiarity came a sense of advocacy; as one student notes, “Because of the service-learning aspect, I believe I will not only be a better and more aware teacher and citizen, but a stronger advocate for ELLs in the future!”

Integrating service-learning into pre-service education courses tends to have a strong impact on the career choices of Education majors. As far back as the 1980s, students were telling researchers at Portland State University that participating in service-learning projects in their Education courses confirmed or challenged their decision to be teachers as they learned first-hand what it means to interact with the public on a daily basis (B. Holland, personal communication, April 14, 2011). This ultimately led the researchers to devote an entire section of the student learning outcomes survey they developed to probing the impact of service-learning on career development (Driscoll,
Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996; Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001). More recently, Miller and Gonzalez (2009) investigated the impact of participating in domestic or international service-learning (ISL) on pre-service teachers’ career commitment, understanding of ELL issues, and knowledge of local community. They found positive outcomes for both groups on all dimensions, but slightly stronger (“Extremely positive” rather than “Positive”) outcomes for ISL participants, who also noted an increased interest in working with ELLs in the future. “[R]esults indicated larger gain scores regarding interest in working with ELLs for international than domestic service learning participants. In this context, the international service experience appeared to have an enhancement, rather than questioning, effect on participant attitudes” (Miller & Gonzalez, 2009, p.6).

At the community college level, ELLs provide needed services to non-profit organizations while learning about language and culture (Bippus, 2011; Seltzer, 1998; Steinke, 2009). Sharon Bippus’ (2011) dissertation presents a multiple-case study of six adult ESOL students who participated as service providers in a semester-long community college ESOL course. She notes, ELL students “want to be active participants in their communities but feel that their language skills prevent them from doing so. …The students, many of whom held professional titles such as doctor, engineer, architect, and journalist, in their home countries confirm this belief” (p. 4). The results from Bippus’ study mirror anecdotal evidence provided by others. Whittig and Hale (2007) describe this as having the “confidence to contribute.”

Students gained communicative competence while developing confidence in themselves. Although the participants were nervous about working in the community initially, they overcame their anxiety by using various strategies. They realized they do have the ability to communicate successfully with English speakers in the ‘real world,’ and have valuable skills that they can offer the community. Additional benefits to the students included increasing their knowledge of American culture and history, developing a higher level of motivation, and forming connections to target community members. (Bippus, 2011, pp. iii-iv)

The photos shown here come from ESL classes Mollie Steinke has been teaching at Laramie County Community College for four years now (M. H. Steinke, personal communication, October 5, 2012).

In the first picture, a student from Kenya reads to 2nd graders at St. Laurence School. The smile on his face shows that he is enjoying reading a folktale from his country to the students.
In the next picture, students from Nepal, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia share stories and writing with residents at the Laramie Care Center and learn about nuclear families in America and the challenges they often face in providing adequate eldercare.

The last picture shows two students from South Korea and Saudi Arabia relaxing in pristine wilderness after cleaning trash at Curt Gowdy State Park. Think about the lessons these students learn about the role wilderness and open spaces play in the American psyche as they spend the day restoring the natural beauty to a park in the shadows of Yellowstone National Park. These are lessons and memories a textbook cannot adequately capture.

International service-learning and study abroad programs that include service components are among the fastest growing areas in service-learning today. These programs include American students volunteering in foreign countries as part of an educational program, international students volunteering in the United States while participating in study abroad programs, and English as a Foreign Language students traveling to other foreign countries to serve and learn, and using English as a global language to communicate in multilingual settings.

The first program described here involves international students in service-learning projects in a study abroad program in the United States. The University of Idaho’s Central American Youth Ambassador (CAYA) program is one of several educational exchange programs sponsored by the U.S. Department of State to bring aspiring youth leaders from around the world to study in America while participating in civic engagement and leadership programs. The goal of these programs is to create change agents who will have a positive impact on their communities while also fostering positive relations with future foreign leaders. The CAYA program at the University of Idaho included 18 Central American youth in two separate year-long programs of study in Idaho. The first six months of the program was devoted to intensive English language lessons for the students at a neighboring college while living with American families in the community.

The second half of the students’ year studying abroad was devoted to specialized training in social entrepreneurship, leadership, and civic engagement. Custom university classes and community-based field experiences focused on sustainable agricultural practices since the University and the students’ hometowns are in agrarian settings. For example, one course taught by an education graduate focused on climate change and environmental systems. Students researched the topic online, attended guest lectures by
university and community experts, and volunteered on a local farm that promotes sustainable agriculture. The students also visited local nurseries and community gardens to better understand sustainable agriculture supply chains, and volunteered with the largest environmental non-profit in the area, The Palouse-Clearwater Environmental Institute, helping with tree planting and wetland restoration projects. In the summer, CAYA students assisted with lessons at the University of Idaho’s McCall Outdoor Science School, which provides hands-on environmental science lessons to thousands of K-12 students across the state every year. Most MOSS teachers are AmeriCorps members and graduate students. These AmeriCorps members complete graduate coursework in education and/or environmental sustainability while volunteering full-time in the summer and part-time during the school year. CAYA students also participated in a variety of cultural events, including serving as guest DJs on a local radio station where they mixed music with historical and cultural essays on their home towns. They also performed traditional dances at local schools and civic organizations. In all, the two cohorts of students completed a combined total of 5,680 hours of community service over the two years in which the program operated. The pictures shown in this portion of my PowerPoint were created by CAYA students as part of the final reflection on their experience.

Michigan’s very own James Perren (2007) provides an excellent description of an ISL project in the Philippines. Students and staff from American and Japanese universities worked with other international volunteers for Habitat for Humanity. Together they worked with local citizens to build affordable housing. Perren notes how the multilingual setting encouraged intercultural communication across all modalities. English, Japanese, Tagalog, and other languages were used and mixed by speakers of varying proficiency for different purposes. As Auerbach notes in her 2002 TESOL book on Community Partnerships, language education often becomes peripheral to other community-defined goals in situations like this (p. 3).

The final case study I’d like to share with you today involves English as a Foreign Language students in Vietnam who volunteer at local schools and community organizations. The project started when I was serving as a Fulbright Scholar at the university. I was asked to teach a lesson on American Literature, which I know nothing about, and so suggested a lesson on folklore instead. We studied many different Cinderella stories, including one from Vietnam called Tam and Can, and compared how the characters, plot, setting, and other literary devices varied across cultures and time. Inherent to most Cinderella stories is the idea of poor down-trodden individuals escaping their life of misery with the help of a wealthy benefactor.

When implementing service-learning overseas, it is useful to connect the methodology to local legends, beliefs, and practices. So as an extension activity, I challenged students to consider ways “to help others in your community.” The students responded with many examples of philanthropy in Vietnamese folklore, philosophy, and history. One popular story describes the love between the people in a country. Metaphor is used to explain that just as different types of pumpkin raised on the same vine share all things, so too must humans share and love each other (Greces, McCord, Nguyen, & Wurr, 2009). The pictures on this slide (of various military leaders and conquests) illustrate “the long lasting fighting for the liberty.” At first I was a little uneasy about this example, but when you consider how Vietnam has suffered one foreign occupation after
another for much of its history, and consider the extensive civil service projects the military performs annually as part of the “Green Summer” campaigns with Youth Communist Party members across the country, it makes more sense. Another traditional saying is illustrated in the pictures on this slide, showing how new leaves cover older ones so they can survive together, just as the younger Red Crescent volunteer is helping the elderly woman in the picture on the right.

The students at the university brainstormed ways they could make a difference in the community, and decided to form two groups that would lead projects at a local orphanage, SOS Children’s Village HaiPhong. One group made crafts and raised money for other gifts to give the children as prizes in traditional games they led as part of the national holiday, Children’s Day. Over 120 students, faculty, and staff from the university participated in this event, which served as an ice breaker and built trust between the university and orphanage that allowed for the successful implementation of the second group’s project: teaching English to K-12 students at the orphanage school every Saturday and Sunday. This continues today, and has spread to other universities and non-profit organizations. The pictures here show the range of sites and projects the students are involved in: tutoring children in a local fishing village, celebrating Christmas with residents at an HIV Hospice, and building low-income housing in a rural village.

Thus, what began as a simple unit on folklore and literature morphed into a limited partnership between a single university and community partner and eventually expanded to a collaborative venture with all universities in the city working in service with the community partner under the umbrella group, Tinh Than SOS. The group continues to use traditional arts and literature in the form of folklore, fables, and song to teach the importance of helping others and working for the common good. (Dubinsky, Welch, & Wurr, 2012, p. 177)

So what can we learn from these examples? Some key characteristics of successful programs become clear. Firstly, provide structured opportunities for reflection. This is central to all effective service-learning programs, and is often said to be symbolically represented by the hyphen linking service to learning in “service-learning.” Next, value all stakeholders in partnership. In TESOL, this suggests valuing and inviting the use of learners’ first languages, as well as involving community partners in program and course planning (e.g., curriculum content, schedule). Thirdly, clearly define roles and expected outcomes. Success demands well-defined partnerships: When roles are clear and each partner contributes from its unique strengths, a multi-sector collaboration can reap dramatic results. Fourthly, encourage and honor local ownership, which is key to replication and sustainability. This point and the last, to incorporate culturally familiar content and genres, are both evident in the case study Ngyuen (2009) and I describe in Vietnam (Dubinsky et al., 2012). Student leaders drive the school clubs, which recruit volunteers to help out on various projects, and the use of Vietnamese folklore, fables, and song embed these projects in local history, culture, and values.

I’d like to conclude as Auerbach (2002) did in the collection of case studies on service-learning in TESOL that she edited:

What these strategies have in common is that they value the wisdom, knowledge, cultural practices, and creativity of community members. They focus on meaningful interactions and on supporting participants in addressing issues that
they themselves have identified. [Language] acquisition flourishes through exchange, dialogue, and meaningful usage rather than attention to isolated skills.” (p. 10)

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