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A Look at Current Practices and Trends in Service-Learning and Considering Possible
Applications to ESL Teaching

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I. A word about my own interest in service-learning

As an ESL teacher at a community college, I am always seeking novel ways to help my students learn the English language beyond the traditional classroom lectures, debates, presentations, and discussions. My constant goal is to enrich and synergize lessons, approaches, and strategies so that, in addition to boosting my students' language competence, I am able to help heighten their cultural awareness and "society-savvy," especially because I realize they will inevitably find themselves in a variety of situations where in addition to speaking English (well), they will need to be able to navigate the workplace, negotiate cultural nuances, collaborate with others, and simply, survive and thrive in U.S. society.

In this paper I share some current practices and trends drawn from the literature on service-learning in colleges and universities, including, where appropriate, links and connections that I have found among service-learning, ESL teaching, reflection, and critical thinking skills. Next, I share insights gained from interviews with practitioners and professors who have embraced service-learning as a philosophy or utilized it as a teaching tool, and have highlighted notable strategies and perspectives. Then, I share what I see as possible connections between what I have found in the literature to what I believe might be applicable or useful in service-learning with ESL students. I move on to discuss obstacles and barriers to service-learning as well as its frequently unrecognized potential promise. Finally, I offer areas of inquiry and further discovery in the area of service-learning.

II. The buzz about service-learning

Service-learning has become quite a popular topic recently in higher education, with many institutions sharing the belief that "it helps students learn more, increases their preparation

for and understanding of the responsibilities of living in a democratic society, and addresses pressing social problems facing communities” (Gray, M. J. et al., 1999, p. xiii). These days, colleges and universities appear to be on a mission to get their students to “serve” and “learn” through active community engagement. Indeed, service-learning’s focus on service to others, according to Twenge (2006), reflects a shift from the predominantly “narcissistic” and “me” type of young generation, to a more civic-minded citizenry concerned about social issues.

According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse:

Service-learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity change both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content.

In discussing civic engagement, Thomas Ehrlich and colleagues at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching highlight the importance for students of “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference.” In their view, “[a] morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate” (p. 12).

III. Service-learning as a valuable pedagogy that goes beyond classroom skills

In today's colleges and universities, there is a growing emphasis on the benefits of engagement in learning that connects the classroom to the community—as a way for students and communities to benefit and grow from one another. Frank DiMaria (2006) shares testimony from professors and students regarding the impact of their service-learning experience, with the students stating that it helped them with their struggle “for a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives” (p. 51). He credits Louis S. Albert, who explains the rising popularity of service-learning this way: “When the accounting major helps poor citizens do their taxes, when the nursing student helps with screenings in the local community health center, and when the computer science major helps small, nonprofit organizations, they all realize the connection between occupational and civic skills” (p. 52) Bringle (2004) sees the value of service-learning as going beyond a “superficial understanding of content knowledge” and “a powerful pedagogy for deepening the learning, developing a broader sense of civic responsibility, and dramatically influencing the personal and professional lives of students” (p. 12).

In an increasingly global world, service-learning is emerging as an initiative that could help raise awareness of contemporary social issues. Taylor and Trepanier-Street (2007) share the impact of community service on the civic education and multicultural competence of students nationwide during the 2003-2004 academic year, in which they mentored at-risk preschool children weekly, through an AmeriCorps program called Jumpstart. At the conclusion of their service, the students commented on an increased sense of self-efficacy and appreciation of diversity, as well as negotiation, and decision-making and leadership skills. The authors recommend that educators increase incorporation of service projects in the curriculum as they can only further the civic development of young people.

Higher education researcher John Saltmarsh (2005) points out the importance of “civically engaged student[s]” engaging in the process of democracy—during and after—their college years, through acquiring, “as part of their education, the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to participate as engaged, democratic citizens” (p. 50). He further contends that “civic engagement can only come about with the development of a capacity for engagement. That development is what constitutes civic learning” (p. 50).

Jacqueline Thomas (2005), a professor of French, states that “[a]n exemplary service-learning project retains a balance between service and learning,” with stress paid to “the learning part of the equation” (p. 1). In her work as a foreign language instructor, she offers her students an opportunity to tutor 4th and 5th graders during the summer months when school is out, during which they get to analyze and evaluate their own discipline as they collaboratively plan language activities for youngsters. She notes that participants got a better understanding of what was “required and demanded” of the teaching profession, and acquired a better understanding of family-school dynamics.

Drawing upon their many years of service-learning experience, service-learning experts Eyler and Giles (1999) share their students’ observation that service-learning is powerful because it is rooted in personal relationships, makes a difference in people’s lives, and further contributes to each student’s sense that the people they work with are “like me.” Both have found that service-learning “is the predictor of an increased sense of personal efficacy, increased desire to include service to others in one’s career plans, and increased belief in the usefulness of service learning in developing career skills over the course of a semester” (p. 18).

IV. Service-learning and a culture of thinking

The literature on service-learning shows a broad range of options for service providers, i.e., students, from tutoring at a local elementary school to participating in a recycling program to serving hot meals in a homeless shelter and setting up a computer program at a non-profit agency; however, there is little discussion on the role of students' preparedness as a potential factor which could affect the quality of service-learning. Thomas (2005) notes the value and importance of helping participants develop critical thinking skills as they "apply their knowledge to the betterment of their community" and "reinforce their prior learning and reach a new level of confidence in their ability to put their learning to good use" (p. 3).

According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, the concepts of "service" plus "learning" need to be established in any course with a service-learning component. McAleavy (2008) states: "Service-learning is reciprocally beneficial, with meaningful service provided to the community and meaningful learning experiences provided for the student" (p. 1) In other words, service-learning goes beyond mere delivery of a service—to one of planning and reflecting upon ways in which students can make a difference while having the service actually enrich or complement their course learning. Tishman, Perkins, and Jay (1995) address the concept of a "classroom culture of thinking" which emerges from the collective interplay of language, values, expectations, and habits—to express, promote, and support the idea of good thinking. Eyler and Giles (1999) expand this idea further, stating that learning and application of material, critical thinking and problem-solving and perspective transformation depend not on service experience alone but on how well and logically integrated theory and practice are.

V. What service-learning looks like at some institutions

The current literature does not include enough information about strategies for initiating and sustaining service-learning in higher education institutions, with most of the studies focused on success stories. There is encouraging mention, however, of an attempt by some institutions to formalize their investment and interest in service-learning by crafting mission statements spelling out their faculty members' as well as students' roles and expectations. For example, the Office of Community Engagement at Bunker Hill Community College (2007) "advocates for a culture that recognizes the valuable connection between community involvement and a student's professional and personal development" and recognizes that "students who are involved in communities become leaders that are not only aware of the world around them, but are aware of their significance in playing active roles in the world around them."

Terkla, O'Leary, Wilson, and Diaz (2007) mention Tufts University, which is "committed to improving the human condition through education and discovery" and "will try to be a model for society at large." Tufts wants to foster an attitude of 'giving back,' and sees active citizen participation as "essential to freedom and democracy, and a desire to make the world a better place" (p.1).

Gonzaga University's Service Learning Center (2000) stresses integrated learning, quality service, collaboration, student voice, civic responsibility, reflection, and evaluation. At Kapi'olani Community College (cited in Seifer and Connors, 2007), students who perform service learning write reflection essays on its impact on their professional and personal growth as well as their perception of their role in the collective effort to solve community issues (p. 74).

California State University Monterey Bay has an even more extensive vision statement:

The campus will be distinctive in serving the diverse people of California, especially the working class and historically undereducated and low-income populations. The identity of the university will be framed by a substantive commitment to multilingual, multicultural, gender-equitable learning. Our graduates will have an understanding of interdependence and global competence, distinctive technical and educational skills, the experience and abilities to contribute to California's high quality workforce, the critical thinking abilities to be productive citizens, and the social responsibility and skills to be community builders.

A unifying element for these institutions is the desire to raise students' awareness of social issues that are an integral part of the fabric of a growing and changing society. There is a pronounced intention to get students thinking about and involved in causes outside of their comfort zone, and away from the mindset of what Twenge and Campbell (2006) refer to as the "narcissistic" and "me" generation.

VI. The role of reflection in service-learning

Some of the literature speaks to the importance of the consistent use of reflection activities throughout the course—in the form of diary entries, reflection essays, and research-based projects—as a way of getting students to practice self-examination, awareness, and sensitivity. Structured reflection is a powerful tool that provides students with opportunities to critically examine and analyze the impact of their service experiences on themselves as well as on the individuals and communities they are working with. McAleavy (2008) claims that service-learning provides a vehicle to effect change because it readily engages the emotions and the

spirit, which can be tapped through inculcating thoughtful reflection. She raises the following questions almost as “food for thought” to consider when thinking about incorporating service-learning in the curriculum: “Do we want our students to leave the classroom with motivation to continue their learning, with more skills to apply and contribute to society? Do we wish to seek ways to touch our students’ pre-formed attitudes and to have them question such attitudes in light of new information?” (p. 3).

Eyler and Giles hold that the roles of reflection and service experience design are crucial to key learning, and state that:

[M]any of the intellectual goals of higher education, including learning and application of material, critical thinking and problem solving, and perspective transformation, depend not on service experience alone but on how well integrated theory and practice are through application and reflection...The quality of service-learning makes a difference (1999).

VII. Possible connections of service-learning to ESL teaching: Lessons learned from informants and other service-learning practitioners

ESL expert Christison (1999) states that facts and skills taught in isolation, but without connection to some meaningful context cannot be remembered without considerable practice and rehearsal. Meaningful classroom activities promote an “ideal learning opportunity for second language students to learn more information in a shorter time with less effort” (p. 4). Latulippe (1999) echoes this assertion, adding that “[w]henver possible, students should be placed in context-rich situations” (p. 4). The field is wide open with a wealth of service-learning opportunities for ESL students that would allow them meaningful language practice, cross-

cultural exposure, and social and personal growth. Like their native speaker counterparts, ESL learners need to be challenged and inspired to take risks beyond the comfort of the traditional classroom, which could ignite new ways of learning and thinking.

Through service-learning, emerging language learners and novice service-learners might be invited to reflect upon their own study strategies in and out of the classroom setting—and, with the help of the instructor, even devise techniques that work for them. Students for whom a culture of thinking has not been intentionally instilled might view service-learning as nothing more than volunteer, mindless, and meaningless work with ill-understood academic benefit. It is therefore essential to establish a link between classroom learning and outside practice, as this is key to heightening ESL students' awareness, interest, and investment in the mission upon which service-learning, in general, is premised: making a contribution to an important cause while simultaneously enriching and broadening one's learning.

Mike D. and Michelle S., two ESL professors at Bunker Hill Community College, have recently deliberately built service-learning into their ESL courses. Both professors' students take a service-learning writing course themed around recycling and "going green," and throughout the semester conduct research and write on topics related to recycling, from collecting soda bottles to using recyclable supermarket bags and energy-saving light bulbs. When asked how they market the idea of service-learning to their ESL students, the professors claim that they use the Bunker Hill campus as an actual example, showing students facts and figures on the amount of paper that goes to waste on campus. They use the data sharing as a jump-off point to a deeper discussion on what they as a "class community" can do for the community.

“Because many ESL students do not always read the course description in the catalogue when they sign up, it is important to let them know that the course has a service-learning component around recycling, and they can opt out if it’s not their thing,” they claim. At the end of the term, the students do an on-campus all-day presentation during which they give “knowledge quizzes” on recycling, answer questions from the college community, and give away “green” gifts. “The ESL students get so much not just from the preparation that goes into the event. Their vocabulary gets better and they can talk recycling before they know it. They become confident in a topic that has become meaningful to them. Plus, they form a learning community on campus that they would probably never do otherwise,” the professors add.

Chamot, et al. (2002) claim that learning strategies for understanding and using information and skills are particularly important for ESL students as they seek to master both language and academic content simultaneously. In this regard, ESL teachers can help students become better learners themselves—by engaging them (and modeling, as needed) constant reflection, problem-solving, and information-gathering processes on a regular basis. ESL students need to be allowed to experience for themselves the connection that exists between their course learning (grammar, technical vocabulary, interviewing skills, etc.) and larger issues in society (poverty, discrimination, terrorism, health, etc.) Context-rich assignments, oral presentations, and debates ought to be interwoven throughout the course.

Encouraging ESL students to step out of their comfort zone and actively practice the skills and dispositions of inquiry, reflection, discovery, and risk-taking is part of helping them become critical thinkers. Rojas (1996) discusses the importance of gaining “new understandings” by not settling for a “world filled with few questions, easy answers, and perfect practices,” a leap that language teachers can help their students take. Clearly, where service-learning and critical

thinking are concerned, some breaking or readjustment of old habits of learning needs to take place. Rote grammar drills and predictable fill-in-the-blank exercises can be replaced with some hands-on, interactive activities that allow ESL students meaningful communication practice.

Alicia B., a cultural anthropology professor at Bunker Hill, claims that in terms of writing, there is a broad range of topics which could spur students to write, both in the classroom and out. In addition to having her students write reflection essays, she uses their writing “to take into account students’ growth, development, and maturity which unfold throughout the course” and adds that “the more they write, the more I see what changes are happening for them---and to what degree.” In responding to written work, she recommends that “attention ought to be paid first to students’ shared insights, reflections, questions, dilemmas, epiphanies, points of confusion, and successes, as these are windows to students’ learning and thinking.” She also proposes that attention to grammar and mechanics should come only as they interfere with the clarity of the content. She warns against excessive correction could as it could easily stifle students’ initiative.

VIII. Adding critical thinking and incorporating service-learning in ESL courses:

Thinking ahead

Embedding critical thinking skills in ESL classes can help provide ESL students with tools they need to enhance their daily learning experiences, problem-solve, team-build, and boost their strategic spirit, defined by Tishman, Perkins, and Jay (1995) as “an enthusiasm for systematic thinking” and “the tendency to invent and use thinking strategies in response to challenging situations” (p. 97). Perkins and Gabriel (1988) discuss the importance of transfer, in referring to when something learned in one context helps in another, not just in terms of skills

and knowledge, but also attitudes and cognitive styles. Transfer allows students to become better critical thinkers at making important life decisions or interacting with others, which are but a few examples of what students need to engage in as service-learning “practitioners.” Ultimately, the goal should be to spark a synergy of thinking skills and dispositions—and language learning, civic engagement, and personal growth. Service-learning just might be the bridge that helps make concrete the connections between the classroom and the “real world.”

All students need to learn how to develop independence and confidence as learners, and most importantly, gain a strong sense of their own thinking and learning processes. In the service-learning setting, ESL students’ acquisition of a “culture of thinking” could help them think “outside the box”—outside the classroom. Eyler and Giles (1997) found that highly reflective service-learning in which course and community service were well-integrated, was a predictor of reports of critical thinking, ability to see consequences of actions, issue identification, and openness to new ideas. ESL students can be nurtured and pushed anew—in this direction.

IX. Challenges, obstacles (and promises) to service-learning

Not unlike many other initiatives in schools, service-learning is not without its own share of obstacles and barriers as it pertains to its development or implementation in institutions. Taylor and Trepanier-Street (2007) allude to the subject of financial support, which can be a motivating factor in doing volunteer work. With the Jumpstart study conducted in 2003-2004, 85 percent of the participants claimed that they had become involved in the program as they wanted to make a difference in the community. However, almost 63 percent indicated the prospect of earning work-study money (which was provided) was also a factor. According to the authors,

federal and state governments should consider augmenting financial support for low-income students. In reality, students' financial situation clearly impacts their ability or motivation to perform work or service that may not be part of their paid employment or may preclude them from pursuing other income-generating activities.

Sandra Enos (2003) asserts that with the rise in number of students involved in community service and service-learning programs, institutions are establishing service-learning offices, with staff and other means to help them carry out the mission of the campus. She, however, makes the claim that “[d]espite the expansion of community service and service-learning programs on both the college and K-12 levels, one can safely say that the most profound benefits of these experiences and other community-based learning opportunities have yet to be realized in schools and on American campuses” (p. 2).

An issue that Einfeld and Collins (2008) raise is that service-learning instructors themselves need to know and understand essential economic, political, and social structures which affect the populations that their students serve, and help their students make the connection of the service they perform to larger social issues. A human services professor highlights the importance of training for faculty on ways in which to integrate service-learning into their courses, adding, “It’s not enough to go out there and claim that you’re doing service-learning. It’s got to be a more serious academic venture, even if it can be fun experience.” A math professor notes the importance of finding something “extra meaningful and worth it for the busy community college student who has enough trouble making it to their own classes.” He adds: “Perhaps a solid service-learning project can tilt his somewhat limited view of what an authentic education has to offer him.”

X. Looking ahead: Other areas of inquiry and discovery

As I look back at this research project, I see how my knowledge in the areas of service-learning, ESL teaching, reflective practice, and critical thinking has grown.

Although I had initially intended to fuse ESL, service-learning, and critical thinking, my research at this point focuses more on ESL. From the review of literature to interviews with professors involved in service-learning as well as interactions and “trial runs” with my own ESL students, I came to the conclusion that I need to first gather adequate information about service-learning and critical thinking, and then later explore strategies and approaches that link the two with ESL.

There is a wealth of literature on service-learning, but not much on service-learning in ESL. Perhaps more research in the area of critical thinking in a second language (versus first language) learning environment – might inspire new literature on “service-learning plus second language critical thinking plus reflectivity” pedagogy. As an ESL instructor, I struggle daily with “birthing” the innermost, oftentimes powerful ideas and thoughts of my ESL students which I know are there, but do not make it to the surface of discussions or writing assignments. I realize the complexity of second language teaching – and try to offer opportunities that foster growth for my students – beyond just communicative and linguistic competence. I see the promise of the infusion of service-learning and critical thinking in my own work in ESL and know that there is work ahead!

On a positive note, there is growing interest in service-learning as an area that needs to be examined in greater depth by educational institutions. Current studies point to its positive impact on institutions, students, and communities.

An area that needs more research is how to get faculty involved in service-learning beyond their standard workload, say, through course releases, team-teaching opportunities, and grants. With increasing responsibilities and squeezed resources, the idea of getting more faculty buy-in is something institutions can look into more closely. Other questions that might be explored further are: How can institutions get students to be more involved in their communities? What incentives might be offered to students as well as faculty that are realistic, reasonable, and have an “engaging” impact on everyone involved? How can institutions encourage and sustain a partnership among students, faculty, and communities that fosters intellectual growth and civic consciousness?

Given the benefits of service-learning, more colleges and universities should start or augment curricular activities that build around community engagement, with the intentional and explicit embedding of critical thinking skills. Encouraging and helping ESL students to plan ahead, troubleshoot various situations, reflect upon their thinking processes, question assumptions, share perspectives, prove their reasoning, make evaluations and judgments, analyze information for deeper meaning, and make transfers can only help build a strong learning foundation. Service-learning is certainly worth pursuing!

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