



BELINDA BRAUNSTEIN  
*University of California, Santa Barbara Extension*

## **A Model of Service-Learning for Intensive English Programs**

■ **Intensive English programs in the US have begun to take advantage of a growing service-learning movement as a means of involving non-native speakers in their new communities while improving their language skills. This article describes a service-learning class taught through an IEP program at a small California extension program through which university-aged foreign students volunteer on a weekly basis at various local and national organizations. It discusses the phases and aspects of the service-learning course, from initial placement with organizations, to in-class and academic assignments related to the volunteer work, to how students reflect on their own learning. The article also describes common challenges and benefits of employing a service-learning curriculum and provides resources at the end.**

Volunteerism is on the rise in the US. With approximately one third of all teens volunteering (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005), one might ask why so many schools are embracing community service as part of their curricula. "Service-learning expands the learning environment beyond the limitations of a classroom, making an impression on students that lives on after the quizzes and tests are over" (Pearson, 2002, p. 9), benefiting the volunteer as well as the recipient of that person's effort.

Private and university-based Intensive English Programs (IEPs), language programs for students who come to the US for a limited time, can also incorporate service-learning into their curricula to take advantage of the mutual benefits volunteer work provides. It offers a deeper engagement with the community than typical one-time class field trips and interviews with native speakers. Students who are not fluent in English but still able to communicate can give their time in ways that do not require an advanced level of English—sorting items at a food bank with other volunteers, playing with young children in a youth program, assisting the elderly in a retirement home. They can also use their limited English skills in other fields such as math (tutoring youth), photography (taking pictures to document an organization's event), and technical skills (demonstrating word-processing skills), among so many others. As an example, ESL students with limited English skills in Hawaii were able to contribute to community organizations by creating Web pages, brochures, and newsletters for them using computers as a service-learning project in their ESL class at Kapi'olani Community College (Warshauer & Cook, 1999). Clearly students need not be fluent in English to have a positive effect on the community.

Little published research has appeared describing service-learning in IEPs. This article will describe a service-learning class taught through an IEP program at a small California extension program. It will also discuss phases of a good service-learning program, appropriate service-learning placements, obstacles and how they were overcome, and overall benefits of the experience for promoting language acquisition and cross-cultural understanding. Finally, it will offer suggestions for future implementation.

### **Setting**

This IEP program is in a small extension program at a public research institution in Southern California. It is one mile from campus in a suburban coastal neighborhood sur-

rounded by pockets of lower socioeconomic areas. Most students live within five miles of the program and use public transportation, bike, or walk to school. They largely depend on public transportation to reach other parts of the city. For the past 4 years, the program has offered a semiannual 10-week volunteering elective course of 5 hours per week. Approximately 15 students with high-intermediate to advanced English skills take the class. These students can communicate with few or no difficulties but may not be proficient enough for university classes. They are from all parts of the world with the majority—77%—from Asia, with more than half of this number from Korea. The remaining students come from South America, the Middle East, and Europe in a nearly equal distribution. The average length of stay in the Intensive English Program is two terms. Most of the students return to their countries after the course is over; however, some transfer into a professional certificate program, and a few—fewer than 5%—intend to transfer into the research university once they have fulfilled the entrance requirements. Fewer than half generally have had any service-learning experience in their own countries or elsewhere before taking the course.

### **Phases of the Service-Learning Class**

#### ***The First 2 Weeks: Selecting and Contacting an Agency***

In this program, the first 2 weeks of the 10-week term are used for identifying student interest, finding volunteer opportunities, contacting the organizations, and practicing interviewing and language skills. For this, all 5 hours of class time each week is needed. Using a list from the local newspaper of organizations seeking volunteers and Web sites for volunteers (see Appendix B for URLs), students each select three possibilities according to their interests, which are explored in a class discussion the first day. The class instructor assists with placement when a student needs suggestions based on area of interest and in case a student has dif-

ficulty making contact with an organization. Generally, each student volunteers at a separate location, but some quarters two or three students select the same site. Students are asked to select three possible organizations instead of one, because they sometimes find their first or second choice does not necessarily result in a placement for various reasons. Many museums and agencies involving work with animals prefer a volunteer commitment of at least 1 year. Others have volunteer training schedules that do not coincide with the school term.

Once students have found and recorded the contact information for possible volunteer sites, class time is spent on telephone practice and mock interviews. The students themselves contact the organizations to arrange their volunteer work, with teacher assistance as necessary. The process is begun as early in the 1st week as possible because potential volunteers sometimes must wait several days or a week to meet with a volunteer supervisor at a given organization. After the student has found a place and had a successful interview (assuming an interview is required), he or she submits a worksheet to the instructor with the information about where and when the volunteer work will take place. The instructor then uses this information to prepare a letter of introduction and thanks for the student's supervisor (see Appendix A) and a time sheet for that person to sign each week to verify volunteer hours.

#### ***Weeks 3-9: Experience and Reflection***

Once volunteer placement is established, generally by the end of the 2nd week of the quarter, the students perform volunteer work at least 3 hours per week; class time is reduced from 5 hours per week to 2, as a single weekly class meeting. This class meeting is divided into two parts: oral reflection and then language skills. In the first half of class, students sit in a circle and in turn share their answers to three questions written on the board:

1. What did you do this week?
2. How did you feel? and
3. What did you learn (about the organization, about yourself, or about American culture as you perceive it)?

A friendly and nonthreatening class rapport is established early in the term so that students are as comfortable as possible in expressing their thoughts and feelings regarding their experience.

After all members of the class have had an opportunity to share, time is spent on language skills—lessons based on errors found in the students' writing and the volunteers' expressed needs, such as conversation starters for those working with young children, pronunciation practice, listening skills, or topical vocabulary.

Outside of class, in addition to their volunteer work, students complete three weekly academic assignments involving reading, vocabulary development, and writing. They are required to select and read at least two short stories each week from the collection *Chicken Soup for the Volunteer's Soul* (Canfield & Hansen, 2002), a collection of often-inspiring short stories by volunteers that describe the challenges and small victories they experienced in a wide range of settings. Students summarize each story they read and write a short reaction to it. They also submit a weekly list of 10 to 20 new vocabulary words and expressions with definitions and original sentences from the stories and their volunteering experience. This work is corrected for content and language errors.

As reflection is an integral component of service-learning (Mintz & Hesser, 1996, p. 31), students also maintain a reflective journal throughout the course. In these journals, they are encouraged to write about any positive or negative experiences, feelings they have had, and what they have learned. These logs are not corrected for errors as the other work is; the instructor responds only to the content—answering questions, providing insights if possible, and commenting on the students' observations. Instead, structural or

usage errors that are common to several students are noted by the instructor and turned into class lessons.

### ***The Final Week: Summing Up the Experience***

During the final week of the course, class time is again expanded to the full 5 hours. Students practice presentation skills, using PowerPoint to create short presentations about their experiences. They reread their journal entries submitted throughout the quarter and do research on the agencies they worked with. On the last day of class students submit a final summary and give a presentation on the volunteer experience. They focus on what they learned through the experience, what perceptions—if any—have changed, and how they plan to use what they have learned.

### **Types of Volunteer Opportunities**

Community volunteer opportunities are as varied as student interests. The most popular areas with the students in the program have been working with children in after-school activity programs and with the elderly in retirement homes. These placements are quite easy to arrange because of continual demand on the part of the community sites and popularity because of the opportunities they provide for English language practice for the IEP students.

Other popular volunteer sites include homeless shelters, the local food bank, convalescent hospitals, the university's Arts and Lectures program (as performance ushers), and the local chapters of national organizations such as the American Red Cross. Students interested in business have volunteered with a clothing manufacturing company, a retail shop, a local Chamber of Commerce, and a radio station.

Appendix B lists the Web sites of some national organizations that may have local chapters. As another source, California high schools that require community service hours as a graduation requirement usually

have a list of preapproved service-learning opportunities, which can sometimes be obtained on-line by searching the school district's Web site.

### Overcoming Challenges

The class has had the most success in the last 4 years with larger organizations that regularly employ many volunteers; small, local organizations and businesses sometimes have difficulty using a volunteer's time productively or in a manner that allows the volunteer to feel useful. Students may end up doing "make-work" such as filing or photocopying and become bored, as in the case of one international student volunteering at a local Chamber of Commerce. It is important for students to indicate their available time commitment when they apply with an organization, as some require a long-term commitment that short-term students cannot provide.

The most difficult part of the course for the instructor is helping students get established in a volunteer location. There is often frustration if some students' e-mails or calls to organizations are not returned right away. Persistence and patience are key. One student, a medical intern from Chile, was turned down at the first hospital where he tried to volunteer before securing volunteer work as a Spanish-English interpreter at a different hospital. The instructor must occasionally make phone calls to help a student reach an organization's volunteer coordinator.

For the student, not every volunteer experience is a wholly positive one. Some students, especially those with clearly imperfect language skills, find the beginning of the experience a bit frightening. They are frequently uncomfortable the first day in an organization because they are not sure what they should be doing and/or they lack the language skills to express themselves clearly in very new situations. A somewhat shy student from Japan volunteering at a retirement home stated in an early journal entry: "I have nothing to do there, so all I can do is just speak to some-

body. The achievement I can feel there depends on the person I speak to."

In a class discussion the week the journal was submitted, the instructor and the student determined that his difficulty was that he did not know how to approach elderly people to start conversations, so class time was used to practice conversation role-plays with various situations. This turned out to be useful for several of the other volunteers as well.

No matter the students' English abilities, it is advantageous to use class time in the first part of the term on useful expressions for different situations. The students find role-plays beneficial, especially if they can practice the types of situations that are uncomfortable for them. For example, one young Korean student stated that at first he did not know how to properly scold the young children he was working with at a homeless shelter when they did something wrong such as hit each other. The kids picked up on his initial insecurities and ignored his pleas to stop hitting.

Some difficulties cannot be remedied with role-plays, but working on specific language skills in class helps. Another Korean student had difficulty understanding what her 5-year-old charges were saying, especially in the 1st weeks of her volunteer work:

One problem I faced was that I couldn't understand well what the children said. Some children's pronunciation was not clear enough for me to catch the meaning and some of them can speak only Spanish. Moreover, the slang they used for jokes was a more difficult part. I felt really sorry when I couldn't laugh while everyone was laughing.

The majority of students overcome this within a few weeks. The author finds it useful to assign short stories in which the writers had parallel experiences of frustration or difficulty in the beginning of their volunteer work. Also, students often express a measure of relief in early class discussions when they hear of others starting off their service-learning "imperfectly." The reflection of one of

many extension students who have volunteered at a youth projects site in the last few years is typical:

I got a lot of things to do the first day I volunteered and that's why I was really surprised at how hard volunteer work is...As time went by I could get accustomed to handle [4-year old children] by using my method. Furthermore, I could change my body to not get tired easily. Now I have two more volunteer work days to finish this class. However, I want to volunteer continuously if I can.

They can also feel frustrated by the volunteer organizations' delayed responses or frightened because of inadequate language comprehension or proficiency. They can also feel just plain exhaustion. However, if the instructor is alert to these challenges, students learn strategies to overcome them.

### **Benefits of Service-Learning**

Not all students encounter difficulties during their service-learning work, and most who do overcome them during the term. By the end of the term, class participants generally express a sense of belonging to the community and satisfaction in their contribution to it. A highly motivated certified nurse assistant from Japan chose to work at two sites (not just one): a retirement home for active seniors and a facility for the elderly in need of medical care. She stated:

My volunteer experience became a really valuable thing. I realized that activities make residents think, exercise, utter and enjoy, and it makes them shine...I could not only learn from the experience but also feel kindness, think about myself and my life, and know many things. I had precious time with residents and activity staffs, and the experience made me improve. I'm looking forward to turning my experience to advantage after I go back to Japan.

During the 7 weeks of active service-learning, students become accustomed to the routines and organizational culture of their volunteer sites. Students who are nervous in the beginning gain a gradual confidence in their work. As volunteers develop greater confidence in themselves or their skills, their perceptions also often change. This can be seen in the journal of a student from Hong Kong, who chose to volunteer with young children in day care although initially she was uncomfortable with children:

My first time, I was very nervous, because I didn't know how to join them when they were playing together...When I volunteered there, every time my feeling was much better than before, because I always saw their faces brightened. In fact, they reassured me. Now I have more confidence to enjoy children and take care of them. Through this volunteer work children really gave me a precious and valuable time.

Some students overcome insecurities after just 1 or two 2 days of volunteer work. The Chilean medical intern described an increase in confidence in his very first journal entry about his experience doing medical interpretation for patients:

We went to Pediatrics Hemato-Oncology, and I saw what I was going to do for the next months. I was scared, because I thought I could make some mistakes and that I wouldn't be able to translate everything. During the first hours I was very nervous, but at the same time excited...My first big job was helping a Mexican man that was going to be operated on. I could translate almost every time someone asked him something, so after a couple of jobs I felt very confident about my ability.

For other students, the benefits of the experience are realized later in the term. A Korean college student summarized her new

appreciation for others after her final day of working with other volunteers at the American Red Cross:

I thought about what I learned from those experiences on the way back home. They taught me many things but the most important thing I will never forget is their warm hearts....I will keep in mind their clean spirit and serve myself for society and the world constantly even after I get old. I really appreciate the American Red Cross family for giving me such adorable memories.

At the end of the quarter, the instructor sends out letters to students' supervisors, thanking them for the opportunity given to these international students to volunteer their time and boundless energy as part of a service-learning curriculum. The response from the Children's Center Program coordinator of one youth project is typical:

On behalf of all the staff and the children of the Children's Center, we would like to thank your program for sending us great volunteers. The children and the staff have also learned a great deal from the volunteers we have right now. We were all very sad to see [Student B] go, but she promised to stay in touch with us and email us pictures of her home town. We in turn look forward to emailing her pictures of the children. Please continue to send us volunteers we love having them and the experience is great for the children.

In their final presentations and written summaries of the experience, students in the English Through Volunteer Work class stated that they valued their donated time for the interaction with native speakers, language learned, and sense of belonging in the local community. They, and the organizations at which they volunteered, think that they have actively contributed to a greater good.

## Conclusion

By organizing and providing service-learning opportunities for these students, Intensive English Programs can create a positive connection with the community and encourage student participation in it, as well as provide students opportunities for authentic language practice, increased confidence, and cultural understanding.

Service-learning may also provide long-term benefits for international students who volunteer in the community. As one young Japanese woman explained, the mutually beneficial exchange that occurs in service-learning has many more benefits than just learning English:

I really appreciate this opportunity to volunteer at the IVYP with wonderful children and wonderful teachers. They taught me a lot of things and impressed me so many times. I got a lot of love from them and did my best to give them my love as well. I volunteered in the USA and learned a lot of things. I'm sure that this experience will be a marvelous memory for me and I'll never forget about this. I thank my children and teachers and this opportunity.

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## Author

*Belinda Braunstein is the academic coordinator of the English Language Program of the University of California, Santa Barbara Extension. In addition to teaching skills-based and content-based ESL courses to international students, she teaches Computer Assisted Language Instruction and Professional Development in UCSB Extension's TESOL teacher-training program, and she regularly presents on these topics at conferences. Belinda has served on the CATESOL board as IEP chair and Chapter Council chair.*



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## Appendix A

### Sample Letter to Volunteer's Supervisor

Sample letter sent to volunteer's supervisor at beginning of term:

January 14, 2003

Dear Ms. XXX,

Thank you very much for giving [Student A] the opportunity to volunteer at \_\_\_\_\_. Our students in the English Language Program at University \_\_\_\_\_ Extension are very eager to offer their help and skills to our community as they improve their listening and speaking skills.

As part of the "English Through Volunteer Work" elective class they are taking, the students are required to volunteer a minimum of

three hours per week during a seven-week period. If they wish to work longer hours and you have more to offer to them, then it is the responsibility of both parties to arrange extra hours of volunteer work.

We require the students to log in their hours every week on their time sheets with their supervisor's signature. This is a way to document the hours they are putting toward their class. [Student A] will bring you her time sheet the next time she comes in.

If you need to contact me with any questions, please don't hesitate to call me at \_\_\_\_\_. You can also e-mail me at \_\_\_\_\_.

Once again, we greatly appreciate the opportunity you are offering to [Student A], and we hope her time and effort benefit your organization.

Yours sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_  
Instructor, English Through Volunteer Work class

University \_\_\_\_\_ IEP Program

## Appendix B Volunteering Resources

Sources on the Internet for finding local volunteer opportunities:

- [www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)
- [www.servenet.org](http://www.servenet.org)
- [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org)

National organizations that may have chapters seeking volunteers in your city:

American Red Cross: <http://www.redcross.org>

Habitat for Humanity: <http://www.habitat.org>

Boys and Girls Club of America: <http://www.bgca.org>

YMCA: <http://www.ymca.com>

For a list of senior living facilities in California, by city:

[http://www.retirementhomes.com/  
North\\_America/USA/California](http://www.retirementhomes.com/North_America/USA/California)

Finally, some universities have offices or organizations that will provide a list of local volunteer opportunities for students and community members.