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Service-Learning for Academic Literacy in Adult ESL Programs

■ **Success in higher education requires a functional proficiency in academic literacy and the concomitant motivation to further develop one's linguistic abilities. For underserved populations, service-learning may provide a conduit for increasing the matriculation of diverse communities at the college as well as university level. Studies of community literacy practices have traditionally focused on monolingual populations. Moreover, the notion of literacy as a tool for creating positive social change is certainly not a novel idea; however, as the higher education population becomes increasingly diverse, there is a pressing need for increased research on the interactions between the first and second languages in higher educational settings. The fundamental principle operative in this tutoring program is that projects are designed and implemented exclusively by adult education students in their second language. The secondary discourses that evolve from these activities become instrumental in facilitating vocational goals and proficiencies that are taught in academic course work at the college level. Finally, the motivation to become an active participant in service-learning projects derives from the ability to successfully employ second language literacy in social action.**

Introduction

Service-learning is a well-established pedagogy in community college programs throughout the US (Deans, 2000). However, it is less commonly used in adult ESL classes. In this article, I will argue for greater use of this pedagogy by presenting a case study of an academic-study skills course in which students learn about academic skills, tutor others in these skills, and reflect on their experiences in writing. Service-learning programs, such as the one that will be described in this article, provide opportunities for adults to build effective competencies for using their newly acquired literacy skills in social contexts where they can inspire others by example. Students make direct connections between academic concepts and the development of leadership abilities for involvement in civic issues that affect their schools and neighborhoods. Study-skill development facilitates collective empowerment.

Why is service-learning an appropriate pedagogy for adult ESL students? Adult ESL programs sometimes have a primary focus on developing basic reading and writing skills without a broader vision of the greater vocational and academic aims that the program may seek to achieve. However, when service-learning is integrated into adult ESL programs, students have a chance to develop a greater sense of agency and become more accountable as democratic participants in the dynamic interactions that help build society. As a result, service-learning programs can facilitate active student decision making and democratic participation in the target language, English, and thus empower diverse communities on campus.

The communitarian model of service-learning sees people as social beings who are responsible to one another (Codispoti, 2004). Through experiential learning, students build identity and forge stronger bonds with their peers. Combining the communitarian ethic with a student-centered pedagogy ensures that members of the class are empowered to make more decisions about their own learn-

ing processes. Adults may benefit from a better understanding of the American education system, which may help strengthen the ties between parents and children and promote a positive orientation toward academic achievement in families. Finally, adult students are able to gain more control over their literacy and extend their authority to positively influence their community through participation in service-learning projects, extending their use of academic literacy into new social contexts.

Service-learning courses that create learning communities for adult education students to successfully transition to the community college system exemplify the ideals of literacy in action. Academic literacy development occurs from the nexus of study and experience in a social context. The Campus Compact National Center for Community Colleges defines service-learning as having these four main purposes: (a) to assist students in acquiring and enhancing academic knowledge, civic skills, career aspirations, and an ethic of service; (b) to help faculty move from teaching-centered to learning-centered to community-centered pedagogy; (c) to assist colleges in becoming major contributors to community improvement; and (d) to help communities become safer places to live (Pickeral & Peters, 1997).

Writing for Academic Success

As the course title indicates, the purpose of Writing for Academic Success is to enable adult students to acquire the academic language they need to be successful. It promotes literacy development among a wide variety of learners when community support and skills development reinforce linguistic proficiency. First, by integrating specific study-skills instruction into short essays in which the students share their goals and vocational plans, the teacher helps the class members to prepare for their college course work. Second, by creating specific goals for service-learning projects in which students serve as mentors, performance and retention in this elective

course can be more accurately assessed. Last, by requiring course participants to create learning tools (or deliverables), students become responsible for designing their service projects around the needs of the person they are tutoring. Study skills gain new practical applications.

The course was developed for a large urban southern California adult ESL program spread over three main campuses and several off-site locations. The program has a diverse student population from many regions of the world with significant concentrations of Spanish speakers and various Asian language groups. These noncredit classes are open to the community so the ages of students range from 18 to 80. Students have a variety of motivations for registering for courses, varying from personal interest to specific vocational goals.

However, adult learners often are attending college for the first time or are returning to school after a long time. English as a Second Language (ESL) learners sometimes spend years learning to read, speak, and write the language, and many students wish to continue and take classes toward a degree at the community college or even transfer to a four-year institution. Consequently, they can benefit from a writing class integrated with a service-learning component that gives them the academic skills they need to do well at the college level.

This institution strongly encourages articulation between the credit and adult-education arms of the college so that any student who has the time and desire to train for a new career is able to do so. The ESL department has many students who wish to pursue a vocational track at the college but lack the academic preparation to be successful. The purpose of this course is to be a readily available one-semester elective resource that students can take advantage of to acquire the skills for academic success. The students keep learning logs and set specific goals for themselves. In the process, they learn how to communicate effectively with peers and teachers while serving as mentors and peer tutors to a

fellow student in a beginning/intermediate ESL course for 20 hours a semester.

The course had been designed into seven study-skills modules in which the students learned cognitive academic language proficiency through writing on a variety of related topics. The units in the course are: (a) How to Be a Successful Student, (b) Computer Skills, (c) Learning Styles, (d) Note-Taking Skills, (e) Study Skills, (f) Test-Taking Skills, and (g) Time Management.

As the students progress through each of the study-skills units, they use a written log or Internet Web log (blog) where they reflect on their learning. In addition, each part of the course is accompanied by a required 2-hour weekly service-learning component. Each student works as a mentor on campus with a fellow ESL student who is in a lower-level course. They provide tutoring as needed for the student. In addition, they must keep a written record of the names of the textbooks, computer software, or language games that they used when working with that student. Finally, they meet weekly in groups and discuss their experiences with fellow students participating in the service-learning course.

The course is designed so that students develop a deeper awareness of their own learning processes as well as deepen their commitment to the college learning community. Through the use of technology, instructors can help to map the new connections that the students make between their acquisition of academic literacy and their service-learning projects. By using the student learning logs or blogs as qualitative data, educators can more accurately assess the progress of the student mentoring projects. They can recommend additional resources to students for use in tutoring and create new conversations in class about concerns that have been raised in student compositions. The logs or blogs provide documentation to program leaders concerning the demonstrable effectiveness of the service-learning project. A clear record of progress becomes a key assessment tool and ensures the continuing viability of the course. Students learn to take ownership of their

writing because they see the practical value of their mentorship both to the mentored student as well as to their own academic and sociolinguistic development.

Each section of the course design is supported by research into adult education and basic writing. Since this is an elective course, students presumably would not have registered for the course unless they were motivated to improve their performance in their new target language by helping mentor peers into academic literacy. For this reason, the course begins with a unit on the characteristics of a successful student. In this unit, the importance of organization, goal setting, and definition of purpose are emphasized in the preparation of class work and academic writing. In her book *Strategies for Learning and Remembering: Study Skills Across the Curriculum*, Rafoth (1993) calls this process metacognition. "By metacognition, we mean the knowledge an individual has about cognitive processes and how they function" (p. 14). Adult learners who have returned to school after a long period often have forgotten many of the methods they used in elementary and high school for acquiring new information. Moreover, perhaps their teachers never taught them such strategies in their countries of origin. In some societies, students learn most information through direct instruction and rote memorization. Thus, by starting the course out with a general overview of learning strategies, the students' interest and curiosity to learn is established. Most important, they are taught how to collaborate with the students they tutor to improve their skills.

The second unit focuses on computer skills. The students sometimes lack access to computers in their home countries and their functional literacy with technology is limited. For this reason, the use of blog writing in their class curriculum provides an opportunity to improve keyboarding skills, grammar, and vocabulary usage. In addition, it encourages students to view technology in critical contexts using writing as the tool for shaping their experiences as mentors. Finally, it gives them the opportunity to reflect on the writing

of fellow students in the community of practice by using the comment feature permitted in most blogs. Students participating in service-learning projects benefit from technological experiences. Deshler (1991) explains in his article on adult education that “adults must continue to learn because learning is a requirement for survival in our age of social and technological change. The danger of becoming obsolescent served as the primary rationale for the promotion and study of adult education” (p. 394).

The third unit discusses learning styles for tutors. The research indicates that learning needs to be meaningful to appeal to a variety of students. As Valdes (2004) concludes in her article, “We must continue to struggle to make accessible to our second language students the textual worlds that are now beyond their reach” (p. 90). Mentoring another student requires awareness of the various learning modalities. The learning modalities have traditionally been divided into three preferences: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Visual learners like to learn by seeing a representation of the information on paper, the board, or on a computer screen. Auditory learners may enjoy lectures, music, jazz chants, readers’ theater, and other aural presentations of information to acquire and practice their second language. Kinesthetic learners typically like to learn by doing. They may prefer to work with others and make classroom presentations or they might enjoy doing freewrites and journaling of their ideas for service-learning projects. As students begin to tutor students with a lesser degree of English fluency, they begin to appreciate how an understanding of learning modalities both facilitates their work and helps them adapt their approach to the individual needs of their peers.

Few people have an exclusive preference for one learning style over the others, but instead, depending on the academic discipline and the complexity of the task, they may favor one modality over the other for a given curricular goal. Moreover, there is a clear cultural basis for many learning-style preferences. Adamson (1993) makes this observa-

tion quite clearly in her research. She says, “Perhaps the idea that is clearest to me is that it is absolutely necessary for teachers of ESL to be aware of the complexities of their students’ learning processes and of the students themselves” (p. 82). This is essential since the teacher’s instructional delivery preferences may have a direct impact on the students’ learning. In a student-centered course design such as this one, the use of technology, group work, and student presentations can help to overcome limitations in the instructor lectures and selection of course readings. As a result, when students engage in peer tutoring, they can help paraphrase and clarify lecture notes and course readings in ways that are more accessible and intelligible to second language learners. Tutors may suggest study-skills strategies and mnemonic devices to help learners retain information.

The fourth and fifth units cover note-taking and study skills. These are essential reading and writing practices that may be strengthened and developed in the curricular design. The need for note taking is well developed in educational psychology research. Rafoth (1993) points out that “the major problems students have with reading notes are identifying what should be recorded and recording the information in a manner that promotes retention and learning” (p. 133). Note taking is one of the most important study skills because it asks the students to interact with the text and make constant observations of what they read. Often students forget to take notes while they are reading. Bartholmae (1986) explains that when students read, “They leave their books blank and so a rereading stands only as the act of going back again to empty text” (p. 18).

As tutors work with second language learners in the service-learning program, they learn active listening skills for tracking and noting significant components of lectures. In addition, they spend time rewriting course notes and reorganizing information into more comprehensible patterns. Finally, service-learning enables tutors to become more effective readers as they decide which

parts of the text are likely to be difficult for students and learn how to properly define vocabulary and terminology relevant to the textbook in use.

Other study skills taught include how to keep a journal, active listening skills for lectures, as well as interacting during group work and the use of the library for conducting research. These study skills help to combine the three areas of “academic competence” that Adamson (1993) has developed in his research:

1. The ability to use a combination of linguistic, pragmatic, and background knowledge to reach a basic understanding of course material;
2. The ability to use appropriate materials (which vary according to the degree of basic understanding) to enhance knowledge of course material and;
3. The ability to use appropriate strategies to complete assignments with less than a full understanding of the content material. (pp. 113-114)

Journal writing involves personalizing and contextualizing information in meaningful ways. Active listening implies note taking and the formulation of questions to clarify points that the instructor or class member presents. Last, the use of the library to gather information and do basic research is a fundamental skill that the student will use in his or her college years and beyond.

Service-learning mentors will work with second language learners by reviewing journal entries, rewriting course notes, and assisting with research for term papers. Tutors may discuss their experiences in preparing for course assignments and exams. Students learn effective ways to organize information, consult reference books, and more effectively organize their papers. Academic literacy acquired in the service-learning course will mutually benefit the mentors and their peers for linguistic development and social empowerment. Skills transfer to new contexts as students fulfill learning objectives and achieve educational goals.

Finally, test-taking and time-management skills are mutually dependent. Preparation for an examination involves setting aside time for study and for the interpretation of factual data. Moreover, reading and writing can be time consuming in themselves, especially for second language learners, and both may require periods for silent reflection and thoughtful analysis. Often students do poorly on tests because they haven't allowed sufficient time to organize the information from the course work. In the “Psychology of Adult Teaching and Learning,” Tennant (1991) discusses the values of self-directed learning. “Self-directed learning would be characterized by the mastery of a set of techniques and procedures for self-learning” (p. 194). When students learn more study skills, they learn to more effectively organize their time, set priorities for items that require immediate action, and set goals for fulfilling remaining assignments on a timely basis.

While it is possible to plan their time carefully to complete a variety of important tasks, adult learners may need to discover what their particular strengths and weaknesses are and adjust their study strategies accordingly. For instance, students who know that they read slowly may want to consider allowing more time to read a chapter of a book or to save lengthier questions with more variables involved on an exam until they have answered the simple questions first. Rafoth (1993) says, “Test-wiseness focuses on using the characteristics of the test and/or test-taking situation to receive a higher score” (p. 138). Research suggests that students must manage their time carefully not only when preparing for an exam but also when taking the test.

Second language learners sometimes need more time to read and structure new information. The service-learning program helps students to guide peers at lower levels to define, explain, and organize their newly acquired academic register to maximize student success. Mentors can describe concepts to second language learners that were once difficult for them to master. By using schemata from previous course work, tutors may

show their peers how to gain mastery of difficult new material and better prepare for important examinations. With cognitive strategies for test taking and careful planning of their schedules, students can acquire the skills that they need for academic success. Service-learning helps strengthen the relationship between theory and practice.

Discussion

Since many of the students are immigrants, they realize that society often constructs their role primarily as workers rather than as producers of knowledge, and this often becomes the definition that they accept for themselves. As a result, their ranges of options for success in school and in the workplace become much more limited. By contrast, students who are well-educated, democratic participants in their communities become more responsible, concerned citizens.

This course design was developed in response to the need for a service-learning course that integrates emerging research on second language learners. While the course design remains theoretical at this juncture, service-learning should be implemented for adult programs because it can help build retention and empower students. By combining knowledge of a variety of effective ESL instructional approaches with an innovative service-learning curriculum, the students can learn how to more effectively manage their time and their linguistic capital for maximal benefit. Specifically, the course attempts to be a resource to help adult ESL learners successfully transition from the adult education program into credit classes that put the student on track to a new career or area of interest.

There are some potential pitfalls to the positive implementation of these academic objectives. First, the course may be too ambitious in scope for a 12-week trimester. Another possible weakness in the course design is having enough time for the students to write in class and reflect on the course content while, at the same time, acquiring new study skills. To deal with this very real limita-

tion, writing is at the center of the curriculum and the adult ESL students are permitted more time than a native speaker might need to complete their essays. The development of critical thinking and reflection facilitated by engagement in service-learning are just as important as mastery of academic study skills and techniques. In addition to academic courses, adult second language learners are often seeking departmental resources such as writing centers and tutoring services that they can use as needed. The classes can provide valuable opportunities to practice their writing skills and share ideas in English with their peers from a variety of countries.

A final concern is that students may want to spend too much time on one area of the curriculum. For instance, second language learners may not be familiar with the use of some computer software. Since many adult ESL students may have not used a computer while growing up in their native countries, they often want to use more instructional time than the course can realistically allow for practicing their skills. To deal with this situation, service-learning mentors will help record comments from the second language learners they work with in their logs (or electronic blogs) so the instructor can improve the course in future sessions. Tutors can work with peers to create effective strategies to develop technological skills at academic labs or through additional course work.

Many students express their dreams in their essays while in ESL classes. However, realistically, many people have not been able to make an accurate analysis of all the components of successful student performance. A fundamental principle guiding lesson planning and course design is to encourage students to become critical problem solvers. ESL instructors want to see everyone who wishes to earn a higher degree to do so successfully and achieve some of his or her goals in life. ESL students should not be marginalized because of any perceived lack of ability. For this reason, this course attempts to close the gap between the students' goals and the varying amounts of time

that it may take to master their new academic language with all its new vocabulary and content-specific registers.

The success of the service-learning course ultimately depends on the students themselves taking the initiative and providing role models for succeeding academic populations. In her article "Reflection as Vision: Prospects for Future Literacy Programming," Sissel (1996) underscores the importance of working within the cultural framework of the students' environment so that educators may understand how their pedagogy directly affects their learners' linguistic development:

If the learner is to incorporate life experience into his or her learning, practitioners must understand the learner's world and life experience, both as an individual and as a member of his or her cultural group or community...Whether or not a sense of community in the learning setting is created with and among learners and teachers is dependent upon the social dynamics that exist between them. (pp. 98-99)

A successful service-learning course to promote academic literacy requires teachers and students to join forces as leaders to set specific goals with measurable outcomes. They must invite democratic participation from community stakeholders. McAndrew (2005) believes that "competence and trust are best nurtured in an environment where people feel connected and related, a community where collaboration is the central focus of all" (p. 102). Finally, they must know how to organize mentor training and peer-tutoring activities that give all members the opportunity to play a role in the design and implementation of the proposed project. Identity can be transformed through dialogue and interaction. In this way, service-learning helps students become the architects of their own academic futures while assisting less proficient learners.

Author

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