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## Matching ESL and Content Classes for Successful Community College Service-Learning

■ This article outlines an ongoing collaborative service-learning project conducted at Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga, California. The project involves matching ESL students with sociology students for several interviews during one semester. The sociology students interview the ESL students to collect real-world data by which to examine sociological concepts. The ESL students practice their listening and speaking during these interviews and are exposed to American culture and difficult vocabulary. At the beginning of the semester both groups are apprehensive. The sociology students are uncomfortable with what they consider an atypical classroom activity and the ESL students are self-conscious about their speaking abilities. At the end of each semester, however, reflections have shown that the ESL students have increased confidence in their ability to communicate in English and the sociology students have an increased awareness of a variety of cultures. This project has proven to be beneficial to all participants.

### Introduction

ESL teachers sometimes struggle to think of ways to incorporate service-learning into one or more of their classes in a way that

is effective for the ESL participants as well as the recipients of the service (Etwell & Bean, 2001; Tichenor, 1994). This became clear to the author through several discussions with faculty members at Chaffey Community College, which provides a student assistant and monetary compensation to professors who incorporate service-learning into their classes. Professors who would like to use this pedagogy do not always know how to maintain the rigor of their courses while also being involved in a community-related project. The author has spoken to ESL professors who struggle with this problem. They tried service-learning projects that proved to be more time consuming in the set-up than they were effective in the application. For example, the author of this article had students volunteer at a local Chamber of Commerce event. She also had students evaluate facilities on campus and write letters to administrators. In both cases, students participated in the activities because they were required to, but they didn't see how the activity fit into the course curriculum, nor did they think that they got more out of the class than they would have by simply replacing the activity with a more traditional classroom activity. The instructor saw the benefits of each project but in both cases, the results did not really justify the class time that was given up. This same scenario is true for other professors at this college and seems to be true for participants in the presentations the author has given at regional and statewide CATESOL conferences. The general consensus seems to be: "Yes, this is a great tool, but how do we use it?"

In 2004-2005, the author participated in a project that seems to answer this question well. A new service-learning model was implemented based upon a revised model of an ongoing project by two colleagues of the author. The initiators of this project included one ESL professor and one sociology professor. Together they implemented this project for several semesters. It is due to their vision, persistence, and hard work that the project was well formed by the time this author became involved.

The service-learning model included two mutually dependent projects that involved two lead instructors, two student assistants, and two college courses consisting of 40 to 70 total students, depending on enrollment. One of the courses was an intermediate ESL speaking/listening class and the other course was Introduction to Sociology. Both classes were taught at a medium-sized Southern California community college. Student ethnicity at this college is approximately 30% white, 5% Asian, 43% Hispanic, 12% African, and 10% other. This college offers seven levels of credit ESL classes and one literacy-level noncredit course. Each ESL class is a mixture of approximately 60% Hispanic, 10% Middle Eastern, 20% Asian, and 10% European students.

### *The Model*

The service-learning model used at this community college provides students in one class the opportunity to provide service to students in another class in a mutually beneficial way.

**Content Course:** Sociology 10 (Introduction to Sociology) students interviewed ESL students as a way of providing the ESL students with access to effective English communication. The sociology students were paired with the ESL students and the sociology students asked questions that required the ESL students to synthesize the vocabulary and context of the question and give comprehensible answers using acceptable pronunciation.

**ESL Course:** The ESL 545 (Intermediate Speaking/Listening) class provided the Sociology 10 class with live “subjects” on which to practice their interviewing research techniques and apply their newly learned sociological terms. The ESL students gave answers to questions regarding their backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, and so forth while the sociology students took notes.

This project had three main goals:

1. Provide an effective environment for ESL students to practice speaking to proficient English speakers.

2. Provide the opportunity for sociology students to apply terms they have learned.
3. Provide the opportunity for sociology students to practice interviewing as a research method.

### **Service-Learning Project Activities**

#### *Meet 'n Greet*

Each semester began with a “Meet 'n Greet” event in which the students met the partners they would work with throughout the semester. The groups were created so that students were paired with individuals from different language backgrounds to ensure that they used English as much as possible. Before the event began, all students were given name tags and slips of paper that listed their group members. After each student received a list of his or her group members, he or she got ready for the mingling event.

Both classes were brought together in a common area, outside between the two buildings where the classes were held. Tables were set up with refreshments. The ESL students were sometimes hesitant to approach the sociology students but, because they worked in groups, 2 ESL students could stick together to find their sociology partners. Also, everyone had a name badge, so the students could circulate and read names until they found their partners. Once they found their partners, they introduced themselves and exchanged contact information while enjoying doughnuts and orange juice.

This event proved to be a nice introduction to the project. The students met each other in a casual environment and they were able to put faces to names in a pressure-free situation. If the students expressed disappointment with their matches or an incompatibility of some kind, the instructors worked with the student assistants to rearrange the groups as necessary. For example, a Middle Eastern woman once expressed her concern about having a male group member. The instructors immediately switched group members to honor her wish.

## ***Overview of Project***

The project involved preparation by four individuals: the content-area instructor (in this case, the sociology instructor), the ESL instructor, and two student assistants. (Title V funding has provided money to pay for a tutor/student assistant for each class for the past 5 years.) In preparation for the semester, the instructors chose “task” days and put them on both syllabi. The task days were designed for conversation groups and discussions as well as one-on-one interviews.

The task days involved one-on-one interviews in which the sociology students asked the ESL students questions and 2 ESL students worked in a group with 2 sociology students to discuss a topic. After three or four of these activities, the groups were broken down to be one-on-one (we sometimes paired 2 sociology students with 1 ESL student because of enrollment). At these interviews, the sociology students asked questions and the ESL students answered them with examples from their life experiences.

After each group activity, the sociology students wrote reports about the discussion. Their instructor gave them a variety of assignments to demonstrate what they had learned from the application of sociology terms. (These will be explained later in this article.) The ESL students wrote journal entries in which they were asked to reflect on the experience and comment on their feelings about communicating in English.

After each interview, the sociology students wrote up what they learned about the ESL student they were partnered with so as to document a “life story.” Each report was about two pages long and students turned in two copies. One went to their sociology professor and the other went to their ESL partner. The ESL partners reviewed the reports and made corrections to any information that was erroneous. This provided the sociology students with immediate feedback so that they could adjust their interviewing techniques if necessary. It also gave the ESL students an opportu-

nity to find out if they were being clear in their answers.

At the end of the project, the sociology students compiled their three short reports into a six-page life story report. A copy of this was turned in as a final project and a copy was given to the ESL student. It was a short biography of the ESL student’s life. ESL students wrote entries in a journal throughout the semester. Table 1 provides an overview of project organization.

## ***Logistical Arrangements for the Project***

This project was conducted by scheduling the content class and the ESL class at the same time (9:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. Tuesday and Thursday, for example) in classrooms that were in close proximity. The instructors coordinated their syllabi so that the task days were the same on both schedules. The courses were conducted almost exactly the same as a class that does not have the service-learning component would be. The student assistants met outside of class to create the groups (2 sociology students and 2 ESL students per group) for the semester. Sometimes it was necessary to have 3 or 4 sociology students with 2 ESL students when enrollment required it. On task days, the instructors informed the classes about who would be moving that day. After a brief introduction about the project to his or her class, the teachers sent half of their class away, greeted the other teacher’s students, and then managed the groups that were in his or her room that day.

This transition was confusing the first time, but the students quickly learned how to get to the other classroom and how to arrange the seats to accommodate group discussions. The student assistants were crucial at this time. They helped lead the students to the other room, move tables, and begin the activities.

## ***A Typical Activity Day***

At 9:30 a.m. each instructor took attendance for his or her class (the students had not moved to rooms yet). The students were reminded of the project for the day and there

**Table 1**  
**Organization of Service-Learning Activities for One Semester**

<i>Week</i>	<i>Project</i>	<i>Task</i>	<i>Grouping</i>
1	Meet 'n Greet		ESL and sociology, whole class
2	—	—	—
3	Discussion Day	Group assignment: Rites of Passage	Groups of 4: 2 ESL and 2 sociology students
4	—	—	—
5		Group assignment: Social Space	
6		Group assignment: Socialization/ Self-Portrait	
7		Group assignment: Genogram	
8	—	—	—
9	Interview Day	Life Story Interview 1	Pairs: 1 ESL and 1 sociology student
10	—	—	—
11	Interview Day	Life Story Interview 2	Pairs: 1 ESL and 1 sociology student
12	—	—	—
13	Interview Day	Life Story Interview 3	Pairs: 1 ESL and 1 sociology student
14	—	—	—
15	—	—	—
16	—	—	—
17	—	—	—
18	Final Potluck		All ESL and sociology students

was a short discussion. The sociology students were reminded of the activity structure because they were in charge of a particular

sequence of discussions during the activity. The sociology students gave ESL students an explanation of terms and an overview of the

activity so that there was minimal anxiety. At 10 a.m., the students were reminded of their groups (names listed on the board) and the students moved.

After the students moved into their groups, the activity began around 10:15 a.m. The sociology students were in charge of explaining that day's activity to the ESL students and keeping notes. The ESL students participated and answered questions. Instructors circulated within their rooms to answer questions as necessary and helped with clarification when needed. The student assistants circulated within the rooms and between the rooms as necessary. Often, they were charged with problem solving when someone was absent or for clarifying sociology terms. Usually the class ended around 10:45 a.m.

There were four group assignments like this during the first half of the semester and then the groups were split in half (1 sociology student and 1 ESL student) for interviews. There were three interviews during the second half of the semester in which the sociology students asked specific questions to create a life story report at the end of the semester about their ESL partners. The group assignments, interviews, and life story report are outlined below.

### **Sample Group Assignments**

Group assignments varied, but we did several semester after semester because they are typical concepts in sociology and are easily adapted to group activities. Here are a few examples, but there was time for only four each semester.

**Rites of Passage:** Sociology students introduced the concept of *rites of passage* and gave examples from various cultures. They may have described events from their own lives or given general examples. Then they asked for examples of rites of passage in the ESL students' home countries. They discussed these together as a group and possibly described personal experiences with these. For example, a Mexican student might have

described her *quinceanera* or a Korean student might have described her wedding day. The sociology students took notes for a reaction paper they were assigned to write and the ESL students simply answered questions and participated in the discussion. They then went home to write in their journals about the experience of being in a group with native English speakers.

**Social Space:** Each group was given a slip of paper with a description of a variation in social-space norms in another country, for example, standing in line in Russia.

In Russia a person is standing in line. Another person stands about three feet behind the first person in line. A third person walks up and looks at the line. Instead of taking the third position, he or she fills the gap and stands between them ...thinking that the second person is far enough back that he or she isn't really in line.

Each group talked about its slip and discussed the ways in which this description was similar to or different from their own experiences. After a few minutes, the teacher asked each group to act out its slip and then read it to the class. Each group took about 2 minutes to act out the scene and then told the class about the difference in social space between what is customary for the country on its slip and what is customary in the US.

After all of the groups had a turn, each group made a list of examples of social space differences from country to county. The ESL students gave examples of ways in which their country differed from the US and the sociology students took notes.

**Socialization/Self-Portrait:** The sociology students defined the term "socialization" and discussed how this affects individuals and how they live their lives. Then they helped the ESL students create self-portraits. Each self-portrait had a sketch of the person in the center and then four areas (one in each corner) to describe that person. The areas for description were "things I like about myself"

“heritage,” “beliefs,” and “future plans.” As the sociology students helped the ESL students to complete these charts, they asked questions and explained the concept in each section.

**Genogram:** The sociology students drew a simple family tree of their ESL partners. The ESL students answered questions about their family structure, relatives, and so forth. Using the simple family tree, the sociology students expanded it to include symbols that represented relationships between their ESL partner and his or her family members. For example, they had a separate symbol to show when a person had an estranged relationship with a sibling or when parents had divorced. This genogram was used later in the life story report to describe the ESL student’s relationship with his or her relatives.

**Social Deviance:** Sociology students explained the concept of social deviance to the ESL students and described socially deviant behaviors in the US. They made sure to give examples that were mildly deviant (talking to one’s self) as well as ones that were extremely deviant (pushing someone). Once the term was well defined, they asked for input from the ESL students about deviant behavior in their countries. After discussing behavior that is typically deviant in both the US and the home countries of the ESL students, the groups moved on to discuss behavior that is standard in one country and considered deviant in another. For example, a Brazilian student might have described how a driver might coast through a red light at night in Rio and then point out how this behavior is considered errant in the US. He may explain that in Rio, carjacking is a serious problem and coasting through red lights after 9 p.m. is standard behavior. This task helped people examine cultural and regional norms and how those differ from city to city and country to country.

### ***Interviews***

After several weeks of group activities, the groups were split in half in preparation for the one-on-one interviews. Because the sociology

class was often much larger than the ESL class, students were sometimes paired up two to one (2 sociology students to 1 ESL student). The interviews took place during the second half of the semester and ultimately led to a life story report. For each interview, the sociology students were given “guiding” questions. However, they were allowed to veer from these questions to pursue particularly interesting or poignant information if the occasion arose.

The structure of this part of the project was similar to the group activities in that the students were guided with discussion questions. However, the sociology students were required to come to the interviews with a list of questions to ask that would help them better understand their partner’s culture. These, along with the guiding questions given by the sociology instructor, ensured that long silences would be minimal and the focus would remain on cultural influences on the ESL students and how those influences have guided their lives. If there were an instance when a group seemed to be struggling with finding things to talk about, one of the instructors or student assistants would sit down in that group and help the group by suggesting a few things they could discuss.

The interviews typically began with simple questions about the ESL students’ backgrounds: where they were born, language, and education. As the ESL students described their lives, the sociology students asked for clarification and expansion as necessary. For example, if the ESL student described his or her mother’s cooking, the sociology student might have asked about other childhood memories, whether or not those cooking lessons proved valuable, the relationship with the mother, and so forth.

The goal of the interviews was to have the ESL students give detailed information about their lives in a comfortable environment. In the best situations, the conversation flowed quickly and congenially and there was an incredible exchange of information. Many of the pairs laughed and smiled a lot during the encounter. In the less-than-perfect situations,

the ESL student may have had some confusion with the questions or thought they were too personal. In these situations, the student assistants helped to open them up by sharing information about themselves or by asking for examples from the sociology students. Once it was established that the environment was indeed safe, the participants seemed to relax and enjoy it more.

At all times during the semester, before, during, and between the interview activities, the ESL students were reminded that they were not required to answer any question that they felt uncomfortable answering. The ESL instructor gave several suggestions for responses to uncomfortable questions. These responses included, "I'd rather not answer that," "I don't remember," and "I would rather not say." These kinds of comments were suggested so that the ESL students would be able to circumvent a discussion that they didn't feel comfortable having. In addition, the sociology students were given a demonstration of acceptable interviewing techniques so that they would not be considered too aggressive. Role-plays were conducted before the first group activity and then the concepts were reviewed again before the one-on-one interviews to remind students of conscientious interviewing techniques.

### **Written Assignments**

#### **Life Story Installments and Reports:**

The sociology students wrote three life story installments that ultimately led to a life story report as one of their final class projects. The life story installments (summaries of each interview) were typically two pages long and included specific details from each interview. These were edited and compiled into the life story report, which was typically five to six pages long. These reports included information about the ESL partners as well as applications of sociology terms that had been studied throughout the semester.

As a rule, the sociology students gave a copy of their life story installments to the ESL student soon after each interview. It was

the ESL student's responsibility to read it and provide feedback about the details in the paper. The ESL students gave comments about names, facts, and feelings that were represented in the installment. Often, the ESL students corrected small details when they had been misunderstood. For example, it may be that a student's *father* was a business owner in Vietnam rather than the student's *uncle*. After each interview summary (life story installment) was checked, the sociology students compiled them into the life story report. At the end of the project, they turned in one copy of the report to their sociology professor and one copy to their ESL partners for them to share with their families. The life story report constituted 20% of the student grade and was graded on format, application of sociological terms, and overall comprehensiveness. The report was worth 100 points of the 500 points possible for the course.

**ESL Journals:** The ESL students commented about the activities and interviews in their journals throughout the semester along with commenting about other class activities. They did this as a way to warm up for a particular topic and as a way to reflect on their interactions with other students. Toward the end of the semester, during the life story interviews, they were required to reflect on each interview and answer questions about what they discussed, how they felt, and what they learned about their own culture during the exchange. This ensured that the service-learning project included a critical-thinking component that helped the students examine their own roles in the learning community while also ensuring that the rigor of the course was maintained.

The journals represented 20% of the students' final grade. Each entry was graded on a "check," "check minus," and "no credit" basis. To receive a "check" grade, the students were required to reflect on the topic for that week and write a legible entry (three-quarter page) in which they addressed issues discussed in class or during the interviews or activities. Short or nonreflective entries received "check

minus” or “no credit” grades depending on the level of acceptability. When the journals were complete (approximately 14 entries), the instructor calculated the checks, check minuses, and so forth and gave the entire journal a letter grade.

Examination of these journal entries made it obvious that ESL students often felt hesitant at the beginning of the semester about holding conversations in English and often felt isolated on campus. They mentioned not being comfortable talking to native speakers. At the end of the semester, many of the entries included comments about improved confidence when speaking in English and excitement about sharing their culture with English speakers.

#### ***Final Activity: End-of-the-Semester Party***

The final activity of the semester was an end-of-the-year party in which both classes came together for a potluck. This gathering was held in the faculty dining room and included dishes and drinks that the students made. The two classes intermingled as they ate and drank at the beginning of the party. Then the instructors and student assistants made presentations; the student assistants each gave a speech about his or her experience with the project and gave recognition to the students who made the most progress. The instructors then took time to thank the student assistants for their hard work and gave final comments to the students before passing back the life story reports, final projects, final exams, and so forth.

This party was always a highlight of the semester. It was a place where the instructors could really witness the change in the students. When their interactions were compared with those earlier in the semester, the ESL students were more confident and more relaxed intermingling with the sociology students. Often the interview pairs exchanged cards and gifts and many times they took pictures together and swapped contact information so that they could keep in touch.

## **Reactions to the Project**

### ***Faculty Reactions***

All instructors involved have been overwhelmingly surprised by the continued success of this project. The project recently finished its 10th semester and the instructors have commented that each semester it evolves slightly but continues to be a positive experience for both groups of students. Although the preparation is extensive and the documentation required throughout the semester is enough to leave the teachers exhausted, the results are so extraordinary that there is no hesitation to participate again when a new semester begins. Additionally, the student assistants make the workload manageable.

### ***Student Assistant Reactions***

The student assistants found that this project was unique to anything they have experienced. They commented that more classes should collaborate and make use of the variety of experiences of the students. One student assistant commented to the author that the project was incredibly inspiring to her, that it made her remember that we have a lot to learn from each other. Many of the student assistants have continued to work for the project for more than one semester when their schedule allowed it and many have volunteered time to mentor their successors when they could not continue.

### ***Student Reactions***

The life story reports submitted by the sociology students focused on application of sociological terms but often gave the instructors a glimpse of how the students reacted to the interview activities. Several of the life story reports included wording such as “interesting facts about Mexico” or “my partner’s cultural richness.” The instructors skimmed through these reports to determine the overall opinion of the project and then conducted informal interviews during the potluck to determine whether or not the sociology students could see the benefits of the project. Approximately half of the sociology students



gave positive responses about the interviews while the other half complained that they could not understand their ESL partners. Most of the sociology students, however, thought that the amount of writing required was excessive.

As for the ESL students, many said that they felt more comfortable speaking to native English speakers at the end of this project. For example, one student arrived late to an end-of-the-year discussion because she had difficulty finding the room. When she arrived, she said that she had to ask for directions from another student. She said with a smile that she would never have been able to walk up to another student and ask for directions if it were not for this special project. She also said that her experience talking to non-ESL students on campus was very limited before the current semester and that this project had opened her up so that she now had greater confidence in her ability to communicate in English.

Informative comments from the journal entries after the first life story interviews confirmed this: "From Sociology I first get very nervous I tried to listen carefully so I could understand the questions." After the second interviews, another student stated: "I have been enjoying these activities with the Sociology class, not only I've practiced my English; the most important reason is I'm making a friend." Finally, after the third interview, another student stated: "The third meeting with the sociality class was great, I could understand better than other times and I could talk a little more."

Several other students commented that they felt as if they were more a part of the campus community and that they could enter a content-area class and feel comfortable sitting next to a native English speaker. The author circulated during the potluck asking if the ESL students felt as if they could work in groups in content-area classes. The response was that they felt more comfortable than they did at the beginning of the semester but that it would depend on the subject.

### **Challenges/Future of the Project**

Each semester posed different challenges. The challenges usually involved hiring student assistants or enrollment problems. The instructors found out early on that the student assistants were crucial to the success of the project. Their enthusiasm was adopted by the students and their organizational skills helped the project to run smoothly. When the instructors had difficulty finding good student assistants, the project sometimes had a rocky start.

Also, enrollment and attendance affected the success of the project. Occasionally, the number of enrolled students was so disproportionate that one-on-one interviews were impossible and creative matching was required. This could be done in a way that had minimal negative impact if the ESL instructor carefully chose the more-confident ESL students to have 2 sociology students as partners. In addition to enrollment, attendance also caused problems. At the beginning of the semester, during group activities, this posed less of a problem because the absent students merely missed out on the opportunity to complete that day's assignment. However, when the groups split into pairs for interviews, an absence or a student's dropping caused problems because the interviews were crucial to the life story report that was due at the end of the semester.

If an ESL student was absent or dropped, then the sociology student could not complete his or her interview and write the corresponding report. This was when the student assistants intervened and started juggling partners. If a sociology student were absent, then his or her ESL partner could sit in on another pair's interview. However, the sociology student had to contact the ESL student to make up the interview so that he or she could complete the life story report. Since the individual interviews are not scheduled until late in the semester, most students do not drop after the life story interviews have begun. However, if this does happen, the sociology student is reassigned to another ESL student and is

given time to make up any missed interviews outside of class time. These problems are usually worked out quickly and, for the most part, everything runs smoothly.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

Although service-learning often involves placing students in the community for volunteer assignments, this article demonstrates the rich potential of matching students for service-learning on one's own campus. Because of the close proximity between the two groups, there is increased interaction. This, along with ongoing collaboration between the two instructors, increases the effectiveness of the project. This project was conducted with sociology, but other content-area courses such as anthropology, nursing, education, and communication could also be used.

The author would suggest that to begin a project like this, ESL teachers meet with an interested content-area instructor and brainstorm possible group activities. The project will run more smoothly if it is highly organized from the beginning. Additionally, student assistants make the project much more manageable if instructors have the resources to hire them. The author also suggests that the two instructors plan to meet bimonthly to discuss the progress of the project and make necessary changes. It might take a few semesters before all of the bugs are worked out, but the benefits far outweigh the difficulties.

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