

# 24 Enhancing the foreign language classroom through experiential learning

Connecting and reflecting

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## Introduction

West Point's Department of Foreign Languages provides students with collaborative experiential learning opportunities based within the surrounding community in order to bring multifaceted language, cultural, and civic engagement beyond the classroom for many of their students in a variety of language courses. In this paper, we will highlight examples of the various ways these students in beginner Russian, intermediate Spanish and advanced French engage with the local and regional community in educational and noneducational settings. We will discuss the history of these engagements and share instructor impressions as well as impressions from student participants and community partners concerning learning outcomes and the benefits to both our students and the community. In all three examples, the majority of students were taking the course to fulfill a core requirement. The number of students who participated in each experiential learning initiative varied from as few as ten to as many as 120 at a given time.

Experiential learning is a dynamic learning tool widely utilized in various disciplines.<sup>1</sup> Experiential learning is a process that brings together concrete experience and reflective observation.<sup>2</sup> There are many ways for students to engage in experiential learning, as identified by Furco,<sup>3</sup> including volunteering, community service, internships, and service-learning. In describing how service-learning differs from other forms of experiential learning such as volunteerism and community service, Furco explains that "service-learning programs are distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring."<sup>4</sup> This type of learning combines community-based volunteer experience with activities tailored to elicit reflection on the experience integrated into the content of an academic course. Additionally, this type of course promotes greater civic engagement with local, regional, or even virtual communities.

1 Andrew Furco, "The community as a resource for learning: an analysis of academic service-learning in primary and secondary education," in *The Nature of Learning: Using research to inspire practice*, eds. H. Dumont, D. Istance and F. Benavides (Paris: OECD, 2010), 228–229.

2 Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb, "Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education," *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 58, no. 2 (2005): 194.

3 Andrew Furco, "Service-Learning: A balanced approach to experiential education," in *Expanding boundaries: Serving and learning*, eds. Corporation for National Service (Washington, DC: Cooperative Education Association, 1996), 2–6.

4 Furco, 5.

In terms of the language classroom, experiential learning is a natural fit for instructors and students who are interested in and searching for concrete and deliberate engagement with the target language community. In fact, the National Standards Collaborative Board includes “Communities” among the goal areas of the World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, arguing that “learners use the language both within and beyond the classroom to interact and collaborate in their community and the globalized world” and that “learners set goals and reflect on their progress in using languages for enjoyment, enrichment, and advancement.”<sup>5</sup> By extending the classroom into the community, students gain more exposure to the target language and culture in an authentic way that the classroom experience may not always be able to provide. By placing this into a service-learning model, they also engage in outreach in the local community, providing a specific service to a community partner. Community partners often work hand in hand with the course instructors and service-learning offices to coordinate a volunteering program that best suits their needs. Students reflect on the experience, which typically not only addresses the experiential component but also affords students the opportunity to make unique observations about language and culture.

Service-learning, however, most often relies upon a sustained semester-long service commitment, requiring a great deal of time and flexibility for successful integration into a course. Unfortunately, some courses and even college programs may not be able to accommodate these requirements. Here at West Point, for example, cadet time is highly structured, including academic, physical, and military training and leadership responsibilities. Regulations at the academy are similar to those of active duty soldiers, precluding autonomous scheduling and transportation. A traditional service-learning model is not possible as a result of these significant limitations. Therefore, our approach aims for a one-time, quality experience for the learner and the community partner in lieu of a more sustained engagement throughout a semester. Our style of community engagement incorporates many of the key elements of service-learning, including experiential learning, robust and continuous relationships with community partners, and deliberate inclusion in the academic structure of the course, primarily through reflection. It also provides an effective solution for instructors facing similar logistical constraints while demonstrating the value of incorporating not only a form of experiential learning but one that approximates the service-learning model. Although specific groups of students only participate in one community visit per semester, the partnerships with the community are longstanding, mutually beneficial relationships developed over several years, demonstrating a sustained service commitment between the course and the community partner.

### **Bilingual in the Bronx: Spanish experiential learning**

New York City and its greater metropolitan area are rich in diversity, including many people who speak Spanish as their first language.<sup>6</sup> In the spring of 2014, an intermediate level Spanish course established a community partner relationship with a charter academy in the Bronx, which was identified through the lead instructor’s alumni network, and this

5 The National Standards Collaborative Board. “*World-readiness standards for learning languages summary*,” ACTFL, 2015, [www.actfl.org/publications/all/world-readiness-standards-Learning-languages](http://www.actfl.org/publications/all/world-readiness-standards-Learning-languages).

6 For more information about the diversity of New York City, see [www.worldatlas.com/articles/how-many-languages-are-spoken-in-nyc.html](http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/how-many-languages-are-spoken-in-nyc.html) and <https://elalliance.org/programs/maps/>.

partnership continued through the spring of 2018. This partnership afforded West Point cadets, all L2 learners of Spanish, the opportunity to work with Spanish-speaking students who were L2 learners of English. A language exchange of this type in an educational setting is common in many language courses with an experiential learning component, as it has the potential for a symbiotic relationship between the L1 and L2 populations.

Cadets enrolled in the intermediate-level Spanish conversation course visited the school for a one-time visit each spring. The community partner drove the structure of the visit, including preparing a schedule and identifying the classes and experiences in which the cadets would participate to best support the students at the school. During the visit, cadets assisted the fifth- through eighth-grade students, primarily English language learners, in their language arts and mathematics classes. Students identified as “rising leaders” were also invited to eat lunch with the West Point cadets, where the discussion ranged from the language learning experience and cadet life to likes, dislikes, and other interests. These interactions were planned by the community partner as the best opportunities for interaction and impact among their student population, as our cadets represented students who are language learners but also college students and future members of the military, two aspects that the partner felt might serve as inspiration to the student population.

The connection of this visit to the Spanish curriculum has evolved throughout the partnership. During the 2014 iteration, cadets completed a short reflection paper about the visit in which they discussed the challenges of learning a new language, the value of mentorship and education, and the importance of the new perspectives they gained through the experience. Reflecting on language learning, one cadet expressed that while it was challenging at times to understand the students, “it also helped me realize that I probably present the same challenge with Spanish, as lack of proficiency in a language can lead to lack of confidence.”<sup>7</sup> Another student indicated that they had a greater appreciation for the challenge of learning a language: “This trip to the Bronx was an amazing experience because not only did the kids get to hear about opportunities and why being bilingual is advantageous to them, but we got to have a greater appreciation of how hard it is to come into a country and pick up the language.”<sup>8</sup> These reflections represent a key component of the experience in that students gain a greater awareness of themselves and others as language learners and of the unique challenges a person may experience while learning a language. In subsequent years, the visit was closely tied with course material related to lifelong language learning and Spanish language speakers in the United States. Although there was no explicit reflective component, students still found great value in the experience and shared comments like that about the 2014 experience with instructors. As an experiential opportunity rooted in service to the community, this experience provided both students and the community partner the tangible benefits of interacting with the target language community through civic engagement.

### **Middle school in Monroe: French experiential learning**

For students studying French at the advanced level, the lead instructor collaborated with a community partner about 30 minutes away at a local public middle school. Unlike the Spanish example, the cadets are not interacting with a population of native speakers but

7 Spanish Student 1, May 2014.

8 Spanish Student 2, May 2014.

rather seventh- and eighth-grade middle school students in their first or second year of learning French. In developing this initiative, the middle school teachers expressed a need for language models for their students, and advanced students of French were a natural choice. As L2 learners themselves, many of the West Point students can identify with these middle schoolers, because not too long ago, they were also beginning their study of French. While not native speakers of French, the cadets are conversational and possess a certain level of comfort with the language. Their experience in the language makes them ideal role models for these young learners because the cadets represent the very possible and very attainable results of their language study.

For the past seven years, West Point cadets have had the opportunity to interact with middle school students, faculty, and staff in a variety of settings throughout the school day. Although their primary focus is the foreign language classroom, these students have also engaged in US history, physical education, Special Olympics, the library, lunch and recess. Members of the school community look forward to this visit each fall, welcoming them warmly at the first sight of their uniforms. Continuity is created in part thanks to the uniform because the cadets are seen as a cohesive group rather than as individuals. The excitement and positivity surrounding the presence of the cadets at the school and the commitment to continuing the partnership are evident in correspondence with the West Point lead instructor:

What an amazing day! Thanks so much for allowing me the opportunity to have the cadets spend some time in my classes. It was a rewarding experience for my students and myself. . . . I hope to be part of this again next year!<sup>9</sup>

The cadets' primary task is to plan and execute two different lessons: one for the seventh-graders and one for the eighth-graders. There are six classes, three for each level, representing around 150 middle school students with whom the cadets will interact in the foreign language classroom setting. For the seventh-grade classes, the cadets prepare presentations on Francophone countries in English at the request of the teacher. This is followed by a trivia-style activity, which cadets both prepare and lead, teaching the students the rules and giving them simple French sentences to use with the game. The countries chosen often reflect places that these cadets have visited, either with their families or through West Point language immersion programs, making the presentations highly engaging and impactful for their young audience. In reflecting on this impact in correspondence with the West Point course director, the middle school teacher noted,

First and foremost, the middle schoolers get to see where languages can take you. Those presentations the cadets did on places they'd visited made the benefits of studying foreign language and cultures instantly obvious. There was "Look! You can go here! And you can do this! Because WE did."<sup>10</sup>

The lesson the cadets create for the eighth-grade students is based on the vocabulary the middle schoolers are currently studying. During one visit, the unit revolved around colors and clothing items. After refamiliarizing themselves with the vocabulary, cadets created

9 French Community Partner 1, email message to author, November 2019.

10 French Community Partner 2, email message to author, January 2016.

a team-centered, information gap activity to practice the vocabulary with the students. During this fast-paced activity, the cadets and middle schoolers solved a problem together while working exclusively in French. More recently, cadets taught the middle schoolers how to give and receive directions in French. The cadets felt they would be able to give more individualized attention to each student with smaller groups. This time, instead of doing one large activity with the entire class, this group of cadets decided to create three distinct activities through which the middle schoolers would rotate during the class period.

This community-based experience is connected to the West Point French curriculum in several ways. First, the focus of one of the course units – the Francophone world – serves as the basis for the seventh-grade lesson. Second, the cadets use their French language skills as they work together to prepare the activities for the visit, as well as during the visit itself. Finally, cadets write a reflection about the experience in French in preparation for an in-class discussion that is conducted in French. Having to prepare a written version of their reflection allows students to process the experience of the day and articulate it in French prior to speaking about it in class.

For most students, this represents the first time they will have used French while leading a task and perhaps their first time serving as a language-learning model for younger students. It is not uncommon for them to be surprised by how much their French has progressed since they were in middle school or high school. In addition, this experience forces them to increase their accuracy to avoid making mistakes in front of the students. In one reflection, a cadet noted that “speaking French in front of the kids showed me how much French I have learned and how much I still have to learn.”<sup>11</sup> Their reflections also convey their perception of the overall value of interacting with the community partner. As another cadet noted, “it is important for us to get out into the community. By talking to and interacting with people in the community, we can build connections for the future and improve relationships.”<sup>12</sup> Although not assessed formally, the fact that this community partner has continually renewed its invitation to the cadets for the past seven years is evidence that the cadets are fulfilling the goal set before them of being language-learning role models for these seventh- and eighth-grade students while making positive connections with their local community.

### **Brighton Beach memoirs: Russian experiential learning**

West Point is fortunate to be located near the thriving Russophone community of Brighton Beach, a little less than two hours away by bus. Visits by cadets studying Russian to Brighton Beach date back to the 1990s. Until 2008, the visit was usually undertaken as a kind of L2 scavenger hunt, where cadets would ask willing strangers on the street a list of questions. During one of the usual visits, the lead instructor approached the director of the local Russian cultural center, Ms. Sue Fox, and asked whether she thought the patrons of the center, most of whom were Russian language speakers, would be interested in sitting down and talking with West Point cadets. Her response was a very enthusiastic yes, and since that time, the relationship with the Shorefront Y has been a sustained and evolving

11 French Student 1, November 2018. Although the cadets wrote their reflections in French, they are offered here translated by the course director.

12 French Student 2, November 2018.

partnership.<sup>13</sup> It bears noting that the majority of the patrons are elderly Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union. This means that the cadets interact with adult L1 speakers rather than with school-aged students, as is the case with the previous two examples.

The schedule of events has evolved over time to meet the needs of the community and accommodate cadet language level. The cadets are provided a short questionnaire in Russian geared toward their current level of ability in the language to elicit information from the community patrons, such as finding out where their community patrons are from, what they do in New York, how long they have been there, their favorite music or books, and their impressions of the community and the United States. There are two unique learner populations who engage with this community partner. In the spring, cadets in their second semester of Russian make the trip. There are usually 100–150 cadets in this group, which demands that the conversations be divided into shifts of about an hour. Those in intermediate Russian, the third semester of the program, make the trip in the fall. This group is usually about half the size of the basic group; thus, they get to spend more than an hour in conversation.

The cadets write a reflection afterward to share how the experience differed from their expectations. Ordinarily, these comments reveal that the experience allows cadets to begin to assess their ability themselves: “I enjoy speaking with the Russian speakers because it provides a good barometer of where my Russian is.”<sup>14</sup> Others begin to understand that real success requires that they invest personally in their own language learning: “I think Brighton Beach was a real eye-opener for me. I am nowhere near as accomplished in speaking as I thought. It really showed me just how much more there is to learn and motivated me to work harder.”<sup>15</sup> The benefit to the cadets is clear: they have a chance to conduct a sustained oral exchange with a native speaker about topics of personal interest. The benefits to the community are also considerable, especially because it permits them to realize the value of their L1 ability. Shorefront Y Director Sue Fox explains: “Many of the volunteers are actually immigrant students of our adult English as a Second Language program. For them, their perfect Russian is rarely seen as an asset to the United States to which they have immigrated.”<sup>16</sup> This experience boosts the self-esteem of the L1 speakers while providing unique native models for the cadets’ language development. The yearly visits to Brighton Beach are highly anticipated by the cadets and the community and demonstrate that this kind of experience enhances both language learning and community engagement.

Further demonstrating its value, this one-day, reiterative engagement has evolved in the last two years to encompass a yearlong capstone project for cadets in their final year at West Point. A number of the elderly members of the Russian community served by the Shorefront Y are also members of the American Association of Invalids & Veterans of World War II, many of whom were very eager to share their experiences of the war. Six cadets decided to conduct oral histories of these Soviet veterans. During the fall semester

13 The official name of the Russian cultural center is the Shorefront Young Men and Women’s Hebrew Association, or Shorefront Y, for short. According to the center’s website: “For over half a century, the Shorefront YM-YWHA has been committed to serving the community of Brighton-Manhattan Beach. Established in the early 1950s, the center has been at the heart of change and immigration in multicultural South Brooklyn.” ([www.shorefronty.org](http://www.shorefronty.org))

14 Russian Student 1, October 2018.

15 Russian Student 2, October 2018.

16 Ms. Sue Fox, in email message to author, April 29, 2019.

of their senior year, the cadets researched WWII history from the Soviet perspective and devised a survey to elicit information about where the veterans served. The cadets then decided which veteran they wished to interview, based on survey results. Over several weeks in the spring semester, the cadets conducted interviews of the Soviet veterans in Russian, which were recorded on video by the West Point Center for Oral History. They then shared their findings in presentations to their fellow cadets and faculty. Later, this project caught the attention of the West Point Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, who saw in it a chance to collaborate on a project with the University of Southern California's Shoah Foundation capturing three-dimensional testimony, using new virtual reality technology. In this way, the work that began as service-based learning for the cadets became a means of exploring personal and cultural history while simultaneously providing an opportunity for these stories to be preserved and shared with a new generation and a potentially much wider audience.

## **Conclusion**

The West Point environment demands a degree of creativity from instructors wanting to incorporate experiential learning. We believe that language courses and programs, such as West Point's, that are unable to implement all aspects of service-learning can still take advantage of the benefits of experiential learning and reflective components. The example of the Spanish, French, and Russian programs at West Point demonstrates that such programs can still achieve constructive benefit for both students and community partners by borrowing and incorporating elements from this type of experiential learning into their language courses.

Adapting elements of the service-learning model offers a highly effective alternative to those unable to incorporate it fully. Although the French program links L2 learners with L2 learners, while the Spanish and Russian programs involve linking L2 learners with L1 speakers, all of the programs serve as catalysts to enhance the language learning process to a degree that even the students themselves recognize. These examples make clear that the effort of incorporating experiential learning, and service-learning in particular, is worthwhile, especially in the foreign language classroom.

For similar programs unable to adopt the service-learning model fully, the inclusion of community engagement along with student reflection are valuable additions to the learning experience. These examples demonstrate the range of possibilities that exist when deciding to include the service-learning elements of experiential learning into a curriculum. It can be incorporated into any stage of the learning process, with adult or school-aged partners. First steps include defining your course goals and determining how this type of learning can help your students reach those goals. Identifying a community partner is an important piece of the puzzle because fulfilling your curriculum goals must be reconciled with meeting the community partner's existing needs. When determining a community partner, our examples demonstrate that these partnerships need not be limited to one type of population, i.e., a school or only native speakers, and instructors should think broadly about opportunities to engage with speakers and learners of the target language. The overall value of even a one-time experiential learning opportunity with a sustained community partner reinforces the bridge between the community and the classroom and offers abundant potential for future projects and relationships.