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# Chapter 20- Service-Learning and Community-Engaged Projects for International and Domestic Students

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## Chapter 20
## Service-Learning and Community-Engaged Projects for International and Domestic Students
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*It's a good idea to help the local community by sharing something from our cultures and support each other as well. It really makes a big difference for all.*
An anonymous student comment, spring 2020

Reflecting on my years of teaching, one of my most gratifying and powerful memories as an educator deals with developing a sense of community and belonging in my students. More generally, higher education instructors have come to understand the value of community building and creating a sense of belonging in various areas of our lives and for different populations in diverse teaching contexts (Hoffman et al., 2002; Streyhorn, 2019). I believe that in teaching, these two concepts—community building and belonging—are of particular importance. We can also relate these two concepts to various Habits of Mind that we want our students to develop while in college. Many of these Habits of Mind focus on becoming good thinkers and communicators and on gaining skills in developing meaningful relationships. Through service learning and engaging our students in helping and learning from local communities, we can facilitate their development of Habits of Mind as well as promote their sense of belonging and civic responsibility.

McLeod (2017) explains that volunteer activities address the challenges local communities face. While in a service-learning project, students use the skills and knowledge that they learn in the classroom to help answer these challenges. Lee et al. (2018) underlined that "through meaningful relationships with diverse members of linguistically and interculturally competent communities, possibilities emerge for engaging in democratic and ethical action" (p. 181). In my courses focused on developing speaking and listening skills in English for language learners (ELLs), I have found numerous opportunities to connect what students do in the classroom to the social realities they face outside class. Also, in an introductory orientation-to-college course for mainly U.S. students (*USU 1010: Connections*), I help students see how they can contribute to the needs of a local community. Sometimes, this is as simple as connecting students to one of the resources available on campus (such as an art museum), thus broadening their involvement with the local academic community.

As mentioned above, both approaches (service learning and community-engaged teaching) can be grounded in the ideas of the Brazilian educator and scholar Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogies of the Oppressed*, Freire argued against the "banking" model of education, wherein knowledge is "deposited" into students' minds by a sage on the stage. Instead of the banking model, Freire proposed to engage students in a critical analysis of social realty. He suggested that this approach to education helped students face and resolve problems focused on real-world issues. He saw education as being transformational in nature. Education's main goal, according to Freire and other critical education scholars, should be in helping students become themselves (Horton et al., 1990; Freire, 1969/2000). Similarly, teaching our students useful Habits of Mind helps them become well-rounded citizens of the world.

I cannot argue that the projects I describe below impact my students in a way that profoundly change their lives and the ways they engage with the world around them. But I believe that these projects nevertheless make it possible for students to start to develop the

Habits of Mind that will lead them to live more meaningful and enriching lives, both at college and afterward.

## Instructional Contexts of My Work

As an educator, I work in various instructional contexts. One of my major areas of teaching is working with English language learners in college-level courses. ELL students focus on developing their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in academic contexts. Another area of my work lies in working with freshmen students in *USU 1010: Connections*. This course serves as an orientation to incoming undergraduate students. Among its several objectives, *Connections* aims to cultivate the Habits of Mind that can be helpful for students while in college and beyond. The curriculum, for instance, stresses the importance of becoming a lifelong learner, cultivating the skills of a good speaker and thinker, and striving to be a responsible community member. Lastly, the other area of my work centers on preparing language teachers in the context of the master's program of second-language teaching.

## Service-Learning Projects for Language Learners and U.S. Students

When I first started implementing service learning into my courses, I found the process somewhat intimidating and overwhelming. I had to contact local organizations and leaders who may benefit from my students' involvement. It was time-consuming to coordinate students' possible projects, connecting their interests back to course objectives and outcomes. However, at the same time, I found that the more I discussed my efforts and projects with others around me, I received a great deal of help along the way. For example, as I discussed my service projects with current student teachers in a master's of second-language-teaching course, one of the student teachers invited me and my undergraduate students to her elementary school, where extra help was always needed. Despite certain challenges with implementing these projects, both my students and I found them enriching and gratifying, and as an instructor, I strive to incorporate service-learning projects in all my courses.

Below, I share several examples of service-learning projects that I recently carried out with students. Through these service projects, students were able to practice many useful Habits of Mind, such as gathering data through all senses, creating, imagining, and innovating, and thinking and communicating with clarity and precision.

The first service-learning project took place in a local preschool on campus. I took a class of international and immigrant students to present several projects from their home cultures to the younger students at the preschool. Prior to the visit, we visited the preschool director who told us about the school's teaching philosophy. She also shared with the students and me the following worksheet to help the students organize their thoughts and carry out the activities they had in mind:

**Activity Worksheet**[8]
Students in your group: ………………………..
The title for your activity: ……………………..
The goal for your activity: ……………………..
Materials required for your activity:
List the steps you will take to guide the children through the activity:
         1.

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[8] Courtesy of Mrs. Danielle Jensen Egan, DDE, personal interaction, spring 2020.

2.
3.
4.
5.

The outcome for your activity: ………………………

Since my course targeted students' speaking, listening, and presentation skills, it was crucial for these students to present and interact with a real audience. This group of international and immigrant students was learning the skills of being good communicators and empathetic listeners while mastering a second language (English). Creating short presentations for preschool children seemed like a great opportunity and challenge for this group of students. At the same time, presenting on various aspects of their home cultures (e.g., food, games, songs) allowed my students to feel more confident about their presentations and re-connect to their home identities.

As recommended in the literature on service learning, it is highly important to let students reflect on their service experience as well as collect feedback from community organizations and leaders. In terms of the reflection prompts, I asked students to answer the following questions:

1.  How did you help the local community? Do you think you did a good job?
2.  What was challenging about the project? What life skills did you learn?
3.  Will you be a more responsible resident/citizen in the future? How can you help people around you?
4.  What other service projects can be added to Intensive English Language Institute (IELI) classes? What are the urgent needs of this community?

Of particular importance, I believe, is the impact such projects may have on the students in our classes. Based on their reflections, I see that many of the Habits of Mind will help these students become more involved, reflective, and active members of the world. Here are three students' reflections about the impact of service learning:

- "I will be a more responsible resident in the future. I can help people around me, teaching my culture so they are more open-minded. I think some of the needs of this community are to know more about different cultures and to know about more religions."
- "There are so many people out there that need help in this community. There are so many needs in this community. So, like share whatever we have like food or money with others can help in the community and make a difference and that's what the world is meant to be. Maybe we can find a day and go to an orphanage to visit the orphans and show them our love and providing any support."
- "I also think they helped us to see how pre-school classes in USA are different than in our countries and to develop our English language, which I think is most important in this case… Assignment got us closer to the community around university because in my opinion children and educational institutions are a picture of society and community in many places. … I think IELI program should give more service projects like this, where you can interact with the local community in a direct way, I think that is also one of the urgent needs of this community to get people more closer and familiar to each other."

Because of this project, the students grew eager to help those around them. This helped my students understand their ability to make a positive difference in someone else's life. While

engaging with the local community, students used their critical thinking skills ("some of the needs of this community are to know more about different cultures and to know about more religions"), empathy ("share whatever we have …and make a difference and that's what the world is meant to be"), and voice ("I think IELI program should give more service projects like this"). These are some of the Habits of Mind that educators want to instill in students to help them lead successful lives while in college and beyond.

In addition, I carried out a project involving student digital literacy skills where a different class of international and immigrant students created social media posts, both in English and their home languages, for the Cache Valley English Language Center in Logan, Utah. Through this project, students used some of the digital literacy skills we learned as part of the course. By creating these social media posts, students were able to re-connect to their home languages and identities. In addition, they were learning to take responsible risks, as posting online in the public domain carries a certain level of responsibility (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, style, and accuracy of information in posts).

Finally, another service-learning project that I carried out recently involved a local organization called Family Place. This organization provides family counseling, therapy, and other similar services at an affordable price to community members. My students helped Family Place by making crafts for the children who use their services. While the students appreciated the idea of helping a local community organization and vocalized a desire to continue to find ways to volunteer in various service projects while in college, many of them did not enjoy the "crafts" part of the project, as evidenced in our end-of-course in-class discussion. Despite some of these reactions, I was still able to engage students in practicing some helpful Habits of Mind, such as gathering data through all senses, creating, imagining, and innovating, and thinking and communicating with clarity and precision.

## Community-Engaged Teaching

Apart from service-learning projects, I integrate various educational resources available on campus, such as several free and easily accessible museums (see Brown & Arshavskaya, 2019). I have worked with the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art (NEHMA) most extensively. Discussions of art, especially of modern art, can open students' minds to artistic and creative ways of engaging with the world. Modern art also helps to cultivate such Habits of Mind as responding with wonderment and awe. According to Palpacuer Lee (2018),

> Revisiting, re-creating, and re-locating invitations to engage with texts at the museum could lead to the proliferation of meanings, the development of voice, expertise, and authorship beyond the museum walls. Translated into instructional terms, the enactment of design-based and art-based multiliteracies teaching practices can empower readers with authority over meaning, talk, time, and space. Living ... multiple literacies together at the museum created opportunities to engage fully and aesthetically with situated texts, along ever expanding, and multiple pathways. (p. 250–251)

While completing a museum visit, my colleague (Donna Brown, formerly at NEHMA) and I ask students to answer several questions when they describe and analyze a piece of art. These questions include:

1. What do you see?
2. What do you think?
3. What do you wonder about?

These questions are framed within the ideas of "slow looking." Tishman (2017) describes slow looking as a collaborative, careful, and thoughtful observation of the world around us. As the students wrote their answers to the aforementioned series of questions, they were then asked to share what they had written. In this way, we were able to collaboratively construct possible interpretations of a particular art object and compare our observations. At the same time, students were learning such Habits of Mind as remaining open to continuous learning.

Considering the different student populations I work with (i.e., international, immigrant, native-born U.S.), I strive to make their experiences more meaningful and relevant to their lives and identities. In museum visits with a group of international and immigrant students, for example, I chose the painting *Mongolia's Moon* (Figure 20.1) by Hung Liu, an international artist who explores the impact of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Liu's artwork confronts issues like forced migrations and how individuals face sociocultural and political upheavals and changes. As the visit unfolded, the international and immigrant students described and reflected on *Mongolia's Moon*, often relating this piece to their own experiences in a foreign country (the United States) and the people and memories they had left back home.

**Figure 20.1**

*Mongolia's Moon, 2004*



*Note.* Hung Liu. *Mongolia's Moon*, 2004. Hand-embellished print
34.5 x 34.875 x 1.5 inches. Gift of Driek and Michael Zirinsky
Image © Estate of Hung Liu.

As a follow-up activity, I ask students to choose another piece of art that they could describe and relate to some of the cultural realia in their home countries. The students were able to relate to various issues and identities shown in the art museum, with some students focusing on social justice issues prevalent in contemporary society. The following excerpt from a student's essay demonstrates these connections:

> The African artwork provide a visual form to educate people about racism, discrimination and inequality and help us to finally see the reality. It is where they have the opportunity to share their thoughts and express their feelings. They continue fighting for respect, something they have been fighting for so long since their ancestors. I pray that someday all this hate will stop and everyone will come together celebrating the beauty of life and live in harmony. I will never stop thinking that the power of love conquers everything.

The art museum became an educational space for the students in the class with a potential to cultivate the Habits of Mind that help them become change-makers of tomorrow. The student quoted above highlights the importance of understanding and empathy for people with different cultural and other kinds of experiences than our own.

With *USU 1010* students, I use a painting by Irving Norman titled *Blind Momentum* (Figure 20.2). He explores and critically comments on the commercialized and less personalized nature of current society. During end-of-semester in-class discussions, many of the students found the experience at the museum beneficial and interesting. As a follow-up to the visit, I also assign students to explore the museum further and to choose a painting that they can connect to one of the lessons they learned in the course. The students' presentations were varied and reflected topics ranging from learning about resilience and acceptance to becoming a learner. In this way, some of the Habits of Mind that constitute the core of *USU 1010* became highlighted, visual, and, therefore, more memorable in students' minds and experiences (i.e., the students brainstormed which lesson was the most memorable, how it connects to one of the artworks in the museum, and how to present it to their classmates).

**Figure 20.2**

*Blind Momentum, 1960*

*Note.* <u>Irving Norman</u>, American (1906–1989). *Blind Momentum*, 1960
Oil on canvas 93.25 x 143 in. (236.855 x 363.22 cm) Gift of the Marie Eccles Caine Foundation 1989.7.

## Discussions With Language Student Teachers

As mentioned earlier, I discuss service-learning projects with the student teachers I work with as part of my teaching in the master's program of second-language teaching. Some of my student teachers become enthusiastic to carry out similar projects with their students. Sometimes these MA students' conversations with cooperating teachers and school administrators even lead to new collaborative service-learning projects. One of the student teachers who teaches at a local elementary school invited my undergraduate students and me to her class. The student teacher wanted us to help their second-grade students with some of the following goals:

- reading
- teaching adding suffixes onto words in reading and writing
- retelling the main details and ideas of a story
- cultural presentations
- informational papers/reports

The undergraduate students were eager to help younger learners. My undergraduate students designed short activities focusing on the value of patience and respect for diversity while incorporating reading skills and some elements of culture. Without a doubt, the short activities in a class of younger learners in English allowed the older English learners (my students) experience a sense of a real audience. They also helped increase their confidence as second-language speakers and presenters.

While the topics the students selected reflected some of their personal values (patience and diversity), the same topics resonated well with a diverse group of second graders at a less privileged school. The school features immigrant and refugee students from several countries. One of the books selected by my students discusses the value of diversity and can be helpful for the older undergraduate students and the younger learners as well in terms of developing a stronger identity, personal values, and the helpful Habits of Mind. As a result, again, the students were able to develop many of the impactful Habits of Mind that can be helpful for their future success as citizens of the global world (e.g., listening with understanding and empathy, remaining open to continuous learning).

At the same time, the student teachers in my graduate course were not unanimous in their desire to implement service-learning projects. Some student teachers raised concerns over their students not wishing to volunteer their hours to help a community they were not directly part of. Others, especially those planning to teach less commonly taught languages, were not sure if they could connect their students to the target language communities. While many of these concerns sounded valid, we were also able to brainstorm possible solutions such as preparing students for service projects to make them more meaningful and using online communities in view of a lack of "real" communities in certain situations. In the future, I plan to share with the student teachers some resources on Habits of Mind and ask them to brainstorm possible connections to what they do or might do in the classroom.

## Conclusion

As an educator, I strongly believe in the value of connecting students to the real-world experiences and challenges. As the former first lady of the United States Michelle Obama reminds us, "We are not raising children, we are raising adults." Besides teaching our students necessary content and skills, it is also important to teach life skills and Habits of Mind that will help them be successful while in college and beyond. The real-world experiences that we as teachers can structure and provide to the students seem to be one of the best ways to instill the Habits of Mind that can be useful to future change-makers and problem-solvers of tomorrow's world.

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