

## **Measuring Engagement Impact on Communities: Challenges and Opportunities**

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### **Abstract**

This article describes the author's reflections on a service-learning course at Penn State Lehigh Valley, a campus of The Pennsylvania State University. The author provides background about the university, the community need, and the service-learning course. Reflections from assessing two semesters of the service-learning course are provided.

### **Penn State Lehigh Valley**

**P**enn State Lehigh Valley is a branch campus of the Pennsylvania State University with approximately 900 students located in the third-largest metropolitan area of Pennsylvania (after Philadelphia and Pittsburgh). The author, a faculty member in English as second language education who studies sociocultural diversity and civic engagement, offered a service-learning activity as part of a required applied linguistics (teaching English grammar) course focused on preparing pre-service teachers to work with English language learners. The pre-service teachers were enrolled in a baccalaureate degree program in elementary education, which provides graduates with K-6 certification, and the option for an additional endorsement in teaching English as a second language.

### **The Community Need**

In Pennsylvania, a state-funded literacy tutoring program was created to establish partnerships between community-based literacy providers and universities “for the purpose of engaging college students in local efforts to help overcome the illiteracy problem” (*Sherow, 2000*). The program's overall goals are to “mobilize, train and retain college students as adult literacy volunteers, promote and support the volunteer engagement of college students . . . [and to] provide adult learners with . . . instruction and support needed to attain their goals” (*Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2011*).

The need for well-trained adult literacy tutors is enormous, ongoing, and increasing. A report by ProLiteracy America (2003) found that “while the number of adults seeking help grows year by

year, government funding for literacy programs remains low” (p. 3).

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Therefore, the literacy tutoring program provided a vital service in linking higher education institutions with adult literacy programs in order to address this need.

The author, in need of a community-based partner for her service-learning course, contacted the literacy tutoring program and was referred to a local

agency that served the Lehigh Valley area. The agency is a federally- and state-funded organization that provides a variety of free or low-cost adult education literacy programs. Its overall goal related to English as a second language instruction is to help learners improve their English reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills for the workplace and for everyday life. Many of the adults enrolled in the program are studying for the American citizenship test as well, and the curriculum reflects this focus. In addition, as part of the program, the English language learners establish individual learning goals based on their personal needs, which may include obtaining a General Education Diploma (GED) and/or gaining workforce skills.

### **The Service-Learning Activity**

The overall goals of Penn State Lehigh Valley’s applied linguistics course are to introduce pre-service teachers to current theoretical issues related to pedagogical grammars and to provide them with an opportunity to apply their developing skills of linguistic analysis to recognize, analyze, and remediate grammatical errors by working directly with English language learners. An additional goal is to encourage the students to develop an understanding of and appreciation for working with learners whose cultural background and experiences are often vastly different from their own. Exposing pre-service teachers to opportunities for engaging with diverse learners is important, particularly since “new teachers and teachers in the process of receiving their credential through intern or residency programs are placed disproportionately in schools and classrooms with large numbers of English language learners” (*Working Group on ELL Policy, 2009, p. 12*).

To meet these goals, the author developed a service-learning component for her course. Service-learning can be defined as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (*Jacoby & Associates, 1996, p. 5*). “Properly designed service-learning courses relate the community service experience to the course material and require that students reflect on their experiences” (*Sax & Astin, 1997, p. 25*).

An initial meeting between Penn State Lehigh Valley and the adult literacy agency identified a common purpose and aim, and the English Language Learners Literacy Project partnership was formed to meet a number of related goals.

The English Language Learners Literacy Project has two overarching goals:

- addressing the language and literacy needs of adult learners in the community whose primary language is not English; and
- assisting these learners in attaining their personal learning goals as family members, workers, and citizens.

Higher education goals include providing pre-service teachers with opportunities for two types of accomplishment:

- applying their developing skills of linguistic analysis by tutoring English language learners; and
- developing an understanding and appreciation for working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

The adult literacy agency is focused on two main goals:

- providing supplemental tutoring services to English language learners; and
- working in collaboration with higher education to address local community literacy needs.

## **About the Service-Learning Activity**

The English Language Learners Literacy Project was implemented with a cohort of 22 pre-service teachers who served 63 English language learners by providing 1,090 hours of tutoring services. The students spent 3 to 4 hours each week over the course of

a semester providing tutoring in math, reading, writing, and communication skills to the English language learners. Approximately 104 English language learners participated in the students' tutoring during the two semesters. Only 63 English language learners, however, were continuously enrolled in the program during this time.

The adult learners were asked to establish personal learning goals at the beginning of the program, such as acquiring a GED, obtaining U.S. citizenship, registering to vote, leaving public assistance, or improving literacy skills in order to find employment. The students worked with the learners on these personal goals and informally kept track of the learners' progress in their tutor logs, which were shared with the agency for reporting purposes. In addition, the agency tracked learner progress through the National Reporting System for Adult Education, which began in the 1990s in an effort to provide a mechanism for agencies to show program accountability and effectiveness by "collecting data on adult education student outcomes" (*U.S. Department of Education, n.d.*).

### **Measuring the Impact of the Service-Learning Activity**

In order to trace the impact of the English Language Learners Literacy Project, an assessment was undertaken to explore three research questions:

1. What impact does the project have on pre-service teacher understanding and knowledge of working with English language learners?
2. What impact does the project have on the adult literacy agency and its services?
3. What impact does the project have on English language learners and their progress?

The data were collected by the author, the director of the literacy provider program, and the program coordinator for the adult literacy agency. IRB approval was secured by the researcher to examine the impact of service-learning on the pre-service teachers.

### **The Sample of Students Assessed**

The 22 assessment participants represent two consecutive cohort sections over a period of one academic year. The 22 pre-service teacher students fit the profile of the "typical teacher candidate" (*Lowenstein, 2009, p. 166*). They were primarily female ( $n = 17$ ; 77%), White ( $n = 18$ ; 86%, 21 years of age or younger ( $n = 13$ ; 59%),

and monolingual ( $n = 20$ ; 91%). The majority of them had limited exposure to working with English language learners.

## Data Collection Methods

Data for the assessment was gathered from a variety of sources, including reflective writings, a post-course community-based learning survey, a college student questionnaire, and data from the adult literacy agency. Details about these data sources and the analysis are provided in the sections below.

- **Reflective writings.** The pre-service students reflected on their service-learning experience in weekly tutor logs. This data provided an opportunity to glean an understanding of their developing awareness of the community and the needs of the learners. Although relying on student self-perceptions can be problematic, Matthews and Zimmerman (1999) found “that qualitative methods were best for determining whether students developed particular benefits of service-learning” (p. 386).
- **Post-course community-based learning survey.** The students were asked to respond to questions from the Community-Based Learning Student Survey (Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001) related to their attitude toward and experience with community involvement. This instrument was designed “to describe students’ perspectives and attitudes on issues related to their experience in a service-learning course” (p. 30).
- **College student questionnaire.** At the end of the tutoring experience, the pre-service teachers completed a college student questionnaire for the literacy tutoring program. In addition to basic demographic information, the students responded to questions about two specific aspects of the service-learning experience: the accomplishments they felt as tutors, and the challenges they encountered.
- **Adult literacy agency data.** The agency kept formal and informal records on the adult learner participants’ progress, and the types of assistance the pre-service teachers provided. Formally, the learners were given pre- and posttests of language proficiency

developed by the National Reporting System for Adult Education (*U.S. Department of Education, n.d.*). Informally, the learners themselves set personal goals for their learning when they entered the adult literacy agency and reviewed these annually as they progressed through the program.

## **Data Analysis**

Qualitative analysis was employed to examine the pre-service teachers' reflective writings. Specifically, the reflections were coded using open, descriptive coding (through HyperResearch data analysis software), which allowed the author to identify statements related to the students' knowledge and understanding of working with English language learners as expressed in their tutor logs.

The post-course assessment instruments (*Community-Based Learning Student Survey, Gelmon et al., 2001*, and the college student questionnaire) were used to determine the impact of service-learning on the pre-service teachers. The Community-Based Learning Student Survey provides a series of questions designed on a 5-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. At the end of the applied linguistics course, the students completed this survey to provide feedback about service-learning and how it influenced their knowledge of and attitude toward working with the community. The college student questionnaire was a short, open-ended online survey that the students completed at the end of the program to provide data about whom they worked with during the time frame of the service, what they felt they accomplished, and what challenges they encountered. The director of the literacy provider program compiled this feedback.

The test data from the learners' pre- and post-program language proficiency assessment (*National Reporting System for Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education, n.d.*) was compiled by the program coordinator of the adult literacy agency (These data are often reported back to funding sources as a measure of adult learner progress in a program). The coordinator also collected information about the learners' personal learning goals and their progress related to these goals, as well as anecdotal data about the impact of the tutoring program.

## **Findings from the Assessment**

The purpose of this assessment was to examine the impact of the English Language Learners Literacy Project on pre-service

teachers and their knowledge and understanding of working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners, as well as on the community, including the adult literacy agency and its services and the clients who enroll in its programs. The data collected to measure this impact were gathered from four distinct data sources: pre-service teachers' reflective writings, a post-course community-based learning survey, a college student questionnaire, and adult literacy agency learner data. The findings from each of these sources are discussed in detail in the following subsections.

**Reflective writings.** The early tutor logs reflected the pre-service teachers' initial overall concerns about working with English language learners. The words *intimidating*, *inadequate*, and *nervous* permeated their reflections; many of them transferred these feelings to the learners themselves:

I tried very hard to walk in that first day with high expectations and wonderful notions of how much these students were going to learn; but I have to admit that I wasn't expecting much from them or from me.

As time went on, these feelings dissipated and were replaced with appreciation for the English language learners. Most of the students were shocked to learn about the backgrounds and experiences of these learners:

Working with [this learner] opened my eyes to the level of commitment many English language learners have for this program. He was often required to work 12 hour shifts and yet he found time to attend English classes and tutoring sessions several times a week.

Many of the pre-service teachers used the word "respect" to describe their change in attitude and newfound admiration for their own country. As one student stated, "It was a humbling experience to learn of the struggles many English language learners deal with on a regular basis and how much they appreciate the opportunities afforded to them in America."

A frustration that would surface often was the lack of consistent attendance among the learners. Some English language learners were periodically absent or stopped attending altogether. The pre-service teachers who were able to work with their learners on a consistent basis were able to see growth and commented on this progress in their tutor logs, but this was a rarity.

By the end of the course, many students mentioned the positive impact that the experience had on them overall. Many of them alluded to how much they learned about themselves as people living in a multicultural/multilingual world.

[The learners] came from all corners of the globe . . . South and Central America . . . Brazil, Mexico, Dominican Republic, and Guatemala . . . Syria, Egypt, and China. These students brought beautiful and differing perspectives and experiences to the class. They each respected each other and the tutors and were incredible ambassadors to their native countries.

Perhaps the most telling change came from one student who was resistant to the service-learning activity at the beginning: “In the end, I have walked away from this experience with a more open-minded attitude.”

**Post-course community-based learning survey.** The students were asked to respond to questions from the Community-Based Learning Student Survey (*Gelmon et al., 2001*) related to their attitude toward and experience with community involvement. When asked whether they felt the community participation aspect of this course showed them how to become more involved in the community, 14 of the 22 felt that it had. All but 2 students felt that the community work they did benefited the community; 18 of the 22 felt that the work helped them to become more aware of the needs of their community.

In addition, the students were asked about their attitude toward working with people from different cultural backgrounds. All of them agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable working with cultures other than their own, and 12 of the 22 indicated that the community work made them aware of some of their own biases and prejudices.

**College student questionnaire.** At the end of the tutoring experience, the pre-service teachers completed a college student questionnaire for the literacy tutoring program. In addition to basic demographic information, the students responded to two questions addressing specific aspects of the service-learning experience: the accomplishments they felt as tutors, and the challenges they encountered.

Many of the students identified a strong sense of accomplishment in understanding what it is like to work with diverse learners who have different needs. They pointed to specific instances when

they helped the English language learners with topics such as “basic sight words and reading,” or “understand[ing] challenges with conversational English.” However, they also expressed frustration about the challenge of working with English language learners. Many alluded to the “language barriers,” and how these perceived obstacles had had an impact on their ability to explain the content in a way that was comprehensible. Nevertheless, they tried to find different ways to help English language learners understand the material, and do so “on a level for adults to understand without making them feel inferior.”

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**Adult literacy agency data.** As the English Language Learners Literacy Project unfolded, collecting data about the impact of the project on the community became a significant challenge. It was difficult to obtain direct correspondence between the tutoring provided and the progress of a particular learner because of the many layers of intervention provided by the agency. In addition, the lack of retention and persistence of many of the English language learners required that the pre-service teachers work with more than one learner. Still, the agency was able to provide general feedback about the learners’ progress, and about the impact of the tutors on their overall program.

The agency reported that 63 English language learners were served consistently by the 22 pre-service teachers who provided approximately 1,090 hours of tutoring. These represented tutor hours that the agency would not have provided without the English Language Learners Literacy Project. Of the 63 English language learners, more than one third (22) achieved one or more of their personal goals: 4 had either gotten, kept, or advanced in a job; 1 was able to help children with schoolwork; 1 was able to increase involvement in the community; 13 had attained a better understanding of citizenship skills; and 2 had received their U.S. citizenship. It must be kept in mind, however, that these learners had been a part of the adult literacy agency program prior to this assessment.

In addition to individual goal setting, the learners were also tested through the National Reporting System for Adult Education (U.S. Department of Education, *n.d.*). Of the 63 English language

learners, approximately 67% ( $n = 42$ ) who started on a low to intermediate English as a second language level moved up at least one level based on the National Reporting System scale during the time period of this project. This figure exceeded the literacy tutor program standards for adult learner achievement.

Anecdotally, the adult literacy agency coordinator conveyed that the students provided a vital service to the program. Many of the learners expressed appreciation for the support they received in helping them achieve their goals.

## Discussion

The pre-service teachers entered the applied linguistics course with little experience working with English language learners, but left with a clearer understanding of, or even an appreciation for, the struggles and needs of these learners. By the end of the course, all of them felt that they could indeed work with others whose background and experiences were different from their own. This is an important realization, because “teachers must be willing to learn not only who their students are but also who they, themselves, are as cultural beings and how that strongly colors their teaching” (*Pransky & Bailey, 2002/2003, p. 371*).

The influence of the English Language Learners Literacy Project on the agency was evident in the number of tutor hours provided. It was clear that all of the learners were given opportunities for tutoring support that the agency might not have been able to provide. This relationship among the college students, the literacy tutor program, and the adult literacy agency is an important one, as it provides English language learners with the time and attention they would not have had in a larger classroom setting. This confirms earlier research that found that service-learning projects often fill a need in community-based agencies with limited staff and resources (*Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001*).

## Sustaining the University-Community Partnership

It is clear from the assessment data reported here that the applied linguistics service-learning course filled a need in the community by providing individual and small group tutoring for English language learners enrolled in a local adult literacy agency program. Conversely, the university-community partnership provided pre-service teachers with the opportunity to learn firsthand the skills and strategies needed to teach English and to develop an

understanding of and appreciation for working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. This mutually beneficial relationship is important for both partners, and is projected to continue as long as the pre-service teacher program exists and the adult literacy agency needs tutors. Because the agency relies on a variety of funding sources to support its programs, it most likely will be able to sustain this service-learning project for years to come.

## Limitations of the Assessment

Although it appears that the pre-service teachers were able to understand and connect with these learners, more data are needed to determine the significance beyond their reflective writings. Employing the Community-Based Learning Student Survey (Gelmon *et al.*, 2001) in a pre- and posttest format (or another instrument such as the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire, Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002) might provide further evidence about the pre-service teachers' growth in understanding and change in attitude.

Measuring the impact of the English Language Learners Literacy Project on the learners themselves was difficult. Although many of the English language learners were able to achieve some of their personal learning goals, it was not clear how much direct influence the pre-service teachers had in these accomplishments because of the multifaceted intervention approach employed by the agency and because of the length of time the learners spent in their programs. This is the challenge of measuring impact on communities alluded to by Gelmon *et al.* (2001). Those interested in understanding this impact need to determine "what is reasonable to expect and accomplish with the service-learning activity," and through the assessment process come to understand "the barriers and facilitators of these accomplishments" (p. 84). The process is complicated in initiatives such as the English Language Learners Literacy Project where service-learning is not the only intervention.

## Plans for Future Research

The data from this initial inquiry focuses attention on the need to measure the impact on the community, a neglected aspect of service-learning research (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Gazley & Littlepage, 2006; Giles, 2010). The findings help to shed light on the challenges inherent in measuring the direct impact of service-learning on community members, particularly in situations in which multiple interventions exist. Under these circumstances, Cruz and Giles

(2000) propose “that the university-community partnership itself be the unit of analysis” (p. 31), and that the impact on the community be measured in those terms. In the case of the English Language Learners Literacy Project, future research could focus on several aspects of the project.

First, the English language learners could be divided into experimental (those who receive tutoring) and control groups (those who do not), since the tutoring is supplemental to the agency programs and the learners self-select to engage with the tutoring support. Data about the English language learners’ pre- and postprogram English language proficiency levels (as measured by the National Report System scales or other instruments) could be used to compare progress of both groups within the specified period of the project.

Second, longitudinal data about the project could be examined since most English language learners spend multiple years in agency programs. A variety of questions merit exploration. Do learners who participate in tutoring achieve their goals earlier than those who do not receive these services? Do they score greater gains on the tests that measure adult learner achievement? Tracking these progress indices could, over time, provide a measure of the overall effect of tutoring by pre-service teachers on English language learners.

Finally, the English Language Learners Literacy Project partners need to perform further research not only to determine what instruments could be used to measure impact, but also to analyze the data collected. Service-learning in higher education is often a short-term initiative for students, but this does not preclude higher education institutions from working with community-based agencies over the long term to determine the effects of these projects. As Sandy and Holland (2006) found in their assessment of community partnerships, “a growing openness to learn more about the perspectives of community members and a willingness to transform our practice in light of their input” (p. 31) has the potential to improve service-learning practice.

## Conclusion

The findings from this assessment highlight the positive impact that the English Language Learners Literacy Project partnership had on both the students participating in the service-learning activity, and the community members in the program. They also underscore the need to systematically gather information about

impact beyond the methods used in this assessment. Still, those interested in implementing a similar project will have a foundation on which to develop a clear agenda for organizing a similar service-learning activity, for implementing effective data collection strategies, and for analyzing the data to assess overall program impact as well as the impact on individual participants.

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