Service Learning and Student Engagement:
A Dual Language Book Project

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Abstract

A model is proposed followed by a case study of collaborative project work between student teachers, teachers and English language learners in kindergarten and grade 1. As a model, service learning provides a framework for making explicit linkages between course-based, credit bearing academic content, the identified need of the community school, and the exigencies of preparation for engaging young English language learners in literacy rich instruction and conversation. An array of learning artifacts provides evidence of the impact of service learning on the quality of learning experiences for all participants.

Keywords: service learning, collaboration, early language and literacy, English language learners.

Précis/Résumé

Un modèle est proposé suite à une étude de cas sur un projet sur l'apprentissage du service communautaire/civique de stagiaires en collaboration avec enseignants et apprenants d'anglais langue additionnelle à la maternelle et en première année dans une école urbaine de l'Ouest canadien. En tant que modèle, ce genre de service fournit un encadrement utile à l'explicitation des liens entre le continue académique particulier à la formation, les besoins spécifiés du partenaire communautaire et les exigences préparatoires à l'engagement des jeunes apprenants, par l'entremise d'une richesse langagière et littéraire. L'évidence à l'appui provient d'une gamme d'artefacts et d'occasions du service communautaire/civique sur la qualité d'expériences d'apprentissage chez tous les participants.

Mots clés : service communautaire, collaboration, littérature précoce, apprenants d'anglais langue additionnelle

Introduction

Across Canada (Canadian Alliance for Community Service Learning, n.d.) as well as internationally service learning is one option universities are providing across faculties as a way of making connections to the broader community and involving students in opportunities to mobilize and transfer theoretical learning to application in practical settings (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). These opportunities are as diverse as the communities' needs: from engineering students working on reclaiming vacant buildings to history students working in museums (University of Waterloo, n.d.). In the context of faculties of education, closer collaboration between universities and their partners in the field, and providing more relevant and engaging experiences for pre-service teachers are two themes that have become more salient in the recent literature on reforming teacher preparation programs in Canada (Association of Canadian Deans of Education: ACDE, 2006; Crocker & Dibbon, 2008, Rideout & Koot, 2009).

Service learning provides a framework for operationalizing broad principles of effective teacher preparation that have been articulated by ACDE (2006) and are included in Appendix 1. While Sigmon (1979) is credited with coining the term 'service learning', Bringle and Hatcher (1995: 112; 2000) are widely recognized for elaborating the construct and developing a more precise definition: 'Service learning is a course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility'.

Evolving from the recommendations of the Boyer Report (1996), the work of the Canadian Deans of Education, the more recent survey literature on teacher preparation programs in Canada (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008) as well as outcomes of National Survey of Student Engagement -- NSSE data (2007), faculties across many campuses nationally (and internationally) have mounted a variety of responses to the call for the institutionalization of more meaningful learning opportunities at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Our own institution, the University of Calgary, participates in the NSSE survey and is making clear attempts to address student feedback identifying weaknesses in three key clusters (of five benchmarks) of effective educational practice: active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions and enriching educational experiences (University of Calgary, 2004). This paper describes one initiative, the Teaching Innovation Award in Service-Learning and Student Engagement, available at the University of Calgary supported by the Students' Union through incentive funding (University of Calgary, 2010). Echoing Bringle and Hatcher (1995), Crocker and Dibbon (2008: 10) call for stronger models of collaboration between universities and their field partners as well as case studies that can be used as illustrative examples of effective, principled teaching practices.

The dual language book project makes the connection between campus based experiences with a cohort of students in their final semester in the Faculty of Education and an identified community need: language and literacy development among young English language learners (ELLs) in kindergarten and grade 1 at Almadina Language Charter Academy, a local charter school. As a faculty member involved in the instruction of students in the Division of Teacher Preparation and with a research focus that includes previous studies at Almadina (Roessingh & Elgie, 2009; Roessingh, 2011) I recognized

immediately the mutual benefit afforded through service learning for my students as well

as the Almadina community. Drawing on Bringle and Hatcher's (1995, 2009) definition

of service learning, the paper is framed as follows

- Identification of community needs.

- Course based-credit bearing experiences: Studies in Pedagogy and Schooling (SIPS).

- Critical reflection and documenting the impact of our work.

Identification of Community Needs

Our partner in the dual language book project is the Almadina Language Charter

Academy and the community it serves. The student population of some 500 students in

kindergarten to grade 9 is comprised entirely of English language learners (ELLs).

Increasingly, these students are the Canadian born offspring of immigrants who speak

another language at home, largely Arabic, Kurdish and Urdu. Upon arrival in

kindergarten most of these youngsters are in the early stages of developing English

language proficiency. The research literature is unequivocal in identifying vocabulary

acquisition as the most immediate and pressing educational need in supporting early

literacy development in English and longitudinally, the development of independent

reading strategies and skills for academic success among ELLs (August, Carlo, Dressler

& Snow, 2005; Biemiller, 2003, 2004; Senechal, Ouellette, & Rodney, 2006). Recent

research undertaken at Almadina (Roessingh & Elgie, 2009) reflects this need as well.

A single early childhood teacher (kindergarten to grade 2) --- even in the best of

learning settings, is likely to have a class size of 15 – 20 youngsters. An overwhelming

proportion of the teacher talk and language input for children of this age is managerial or

procedural – aimed at socializing children to the rules of schooling. It does not serve as

rich data for vocabulary acquisition (Horst, 2009). Opportunities for meaningful conversations; rehearsal, manipulation and practice of new vocabulary in personally relevant contexts are rare, often for reasons beyond the control of a single teacher, notably the constraints of class size alone. These youngsters' native English speaking (NS) peers arrive at school with the enormous advantage of a well-developed lexical repertoire, thanks to staggering amounts of 'motherese' or caregiver talk (Hart & Risley, 2003). Over time, the vocabulary gap between NS and ELLs widens, leaving ELLs at educational risk.

The research literature also emphasizes the importance of first language development as a platform for transfer to the second: simply put, children who have a well-developed first language lexicon and the associated cognitive understandings and frameworks can fast map this information into their unfolding English language proficiency (Cummins, 1984). Connections to home literacy practices and encouraging the parents of the young ELLs at Almadina to participate in our dual language book project by challenging their children through first language input, social remembering (telling true stories) for example, is therefore central to the overall language development of these youngsters (Leseman & van Tuijl, 2006; Roessingh, 2011).

The need for adult partners to provide both language input and to promote active engagement and transfer with youngsters in their quest to develop a more robust vocabulary in both their first and second languages makes Almadina Language Charter Academy an ideal setting for the project at hand. Various studies suggest that mere exposure to a talking (English) adult partner with minimal training in interacting with youngsters produces tangible impact on vocabulary growth with a modest commitment of time (Kotler, Wegerif & LeVoi, 2001; Ruston & Schwanenflugel, 2010). Service

learning seeks a higher bar: service learning is academic work in which the community

service activities are infused with pedagogical intent. There is a direct link between

theoretical understandings and their application to the identified needs of the community

partner. In an iterative fashion critical reflection on the intended impact of service

learning informs the next cycle of planning for the work between the university students

and their partners in the community (Furco, 1996). The content of the Studies in

Pedagogy and Schooling (SIPS) Winter 2011 term is described next including the

curriculum and learning engagements provided to the students registered in this course,

and the dual language book project embedded in this course. A brief (calendar) course

description is included in Appendix 2.

Course Based-credit Bearing Experiences: Studies in Pedagogy and Schooling

(SIPS)

An array of SIPS offerings are provided to our fourth (and final) semester

students in the Faculty of Education as a way of deepening their understandings and

discipline knowledge in areas of their choosing. My SIPS course focuses on the needs of

English language learners, and consistently has been fully subscribed and evaluated very

positively. Students bring a vast range of backgrounds: elementary generalists, secondary

English, drama, Social Studies. The common thread is the recognition that ELLs are

present in all class settings, and teachers need expertise to address the learner needs. The

class meets once a week for three hours and traditionally involves readings, projects,

presentations, and independent library based research.

Three years ago as a consequence of an evolving research project at Almadina

and a recognized need for targeted instruction with their kindergarten and grade 1 classes,

I began a partnership with Almadina as a way of engaging my students more directly

with the key theoretical constructs, principles and practices of working with ELLs, and providing a service to the school community, including the professional development of our partnering (in-service) teachers. Many pre-service teachers, as a result of their practicum work in their third semester, recognize that ELLs are present in every classroom in the city: teaching language is everyone's responsibility. Many, however, feel unprepared and lack confidence to address the needs of ELLs, whether elementary route or high school subject specialization bound. SIPS is structured in this case to provide ongoing interaction with our Almadina partners (three kindergarten classes and two grade 1 classes) two days a week in addition to the weekly 3-hour campus based experiences.

Each SIPS student is assigned to work with a small group of children in a table group, with a partnering kindergarten or grade 1 teacher. These table groups remain stable for the duration of the project, permitting the SIPS students to develop a trusting relationship for risk-taking and experimentation with the youngsters – a key element in their language growth. Within each class, there are four SIPS students, creating a small learning community that can share their ongoing insights, compare notes, and trade their learning resources if they choose. Time is given during our weekly on campus classes for this purpose.

For two consecutive years (2010-2011, 2011-2012), this project was selected for funding through the Centre for Community Engaged Learning (CCEL), Teaching Innovation Award (University of Calgary, 2010; 2011). This award adds the formalized dimension of service learning to this SIPS class, and requires the submission of evidence of its success in realizing the specified goals advanced by recognized researchers such as Bringle and Hatcher (1995), and Furco (1996), cited on the CCEL website.

Our campus based time is used for presenting and studying theoretical information and applying this directly in preparation for our work with the children. In a cyclical manner, critical reflection and sharing of our classroom work informs the next week's preparations for the dual language book project. The project is supported with a website: www.duallanguageproject.com where readings, sample lesson plans, ideas for learning tasks and materials prepared by previous SIPS class students can be located, as well as information for parents and an electronic book box containing children's dual language booklets from previous years.

The research suggests an array of principles and effective practices of teaching and learning a second language all predicated on the notion of talk and the importance of adult-child interactions in a warm, accepting and trusting relationship. While some studies noted here have focused on a single intervention, a broad scan of the literature suggests there is no quick 'fix' or one particular technique, approach or strategy that will work for all children. Increasingly there is support for direct and explicit instruction of vocabulary including the importance of manipulating, recycling and extending new learning (Biemiller, 2000); artifact/object based learning (Fuhler, Farris & Nelson, 2006); story book reading (Hickman, Pollard-Durodola & Vaughn, 2004; Fuller Collins, 2005); structuring good questions (Van Kleeck, 2008) and engaging in academic conversations to provide challenge (Goldenberg, 1992; Zwiers & Crawford, 2009); songs and chants as a strategy for helping develop rhythm, pronunciation practice, cultural information as well as new vocabulary and grammar practice (Medina, 1993, 2002). Generating talk in the classroom through a shared experience (e.g. looking at an artifact of personal and cultural relevance, a 'family treasure') permits targeting vocabulary and key concepts, and provides an excellent platform for transitioning into literacy through group

constructed text printed on the black board. Known as the Language Experience Approach, this approach was initially implemented with Maori children by Ashton – Warner (1963) decades ago and has since found strong research support for use with literacy learners of all ages, ELLs and native English speakers alike.

All of these elements must be melded together so that learning can be integrated and purposefully connected. Thematic organization offers this structure and the conceptual 'glue' for allowing us to achieve our goals of accelerated vocabulary acquisition with the children (Lipson, Valencia, Wixson, Peters, 1993). For the purposes of the dual language book project, the kindergarten classes work with the topic Family Treasures, and the grade 1 classes, Grandma's Soup. Each child creates a booklet that contains both individualized and generic vocabulary to the theme, acquired through thoughtfully designed learning tasks. Please visit the electronic book box on the dual language project website to see the details of our work, including the booklets.

Week by week, then, the SIPS students are making deliberate and critical connections between theory and its application as they prepare lesson plans and assemble, create and rehearse with learning resources: games, flashcards, artifact boxes, story books and songs. Ongoing journaling creates an audit trail of their readings, reflections, and insights gleaned both through campus based learning and field experiences at Almadina.

Critical Reflection and Documenting Impact of our Work

Critical reflection and time allocated to sharing of new understandings linking academic content and practical field experiences are a key element of the definition of service learning. In addition Bringle and Hatcher (2009) highlight the importance of documenting the impact of service learning that goes beyond the number of students

enrolled, the hours contributed to the community, the number of faculty and range of disciplines, student evaluation surveys, and the like. They call for varied forms of evidence. Ideally, in this case, it would have included empirical data on vocabulary growth among our young ELL partners as a consequence of our dual language book project. This is beyond the scope of the work at hand, but would make an excellent research focus for a master's degree, for example. Perhaps one of my SIPS students will be hooked, both on the idea of formal research, and continued work on this project in the future.

However, a rich of array of SIPS students' learning artifacts provide evidence of *their* learning. A flip chart activity, for example, completed in partnering groups (i.e. Family Treasures or Grandma's Soup groups) during our campus based seminars approximately half way through our time at Almadina provides a snapshot of their learning, the connections they make, and the opportunity to turn their learning back onto itself by using the flip chart visual as a scaffold for a presentation to our SIPS class. A rubric for service learning was provided as a strategy for promoting reflection, conversation and the co-construction of new knowledge pertaining to language and literacy development among young ELLs through service learning. The rubric is included in Appendix 3.

Figure 1: Flip Chart Task for Student Reflection and Summarizing Effective

Teaching Practices

Other artifacts include lesson plans and learning resources (e.g. games, story

strips, flash cards) that reflect a principled approach to our work and explicit connections

between theory and practice. In addition, images or photographs of our interactions with

the children are recognized as both research data and learning supports (Kuhn &

Davidson, 2007). In our work here, we note this dual purpose by embedding carefully

chosen images as evidence of our influence in the classroom and as a way of telling our

story of transformative practice at Almadina. A picture is not just 'worth a thousand

words' – it conveys information about our efforts as becoming teachers and illuminates

key understandings about our work with children that words alone may not. Moreover,

as objects for reflection and sharing within our class, images are valuable tools in our

learning process within a supportive community of practice.

Figure 2: Small Groups for Story Telling

Dialogic reading engages children in co-constructing understanding and acquiring

new vocabulary.

Figure 3: Games Engage Children in Active Use of New Vocabulary

Games promote active manipulation of key concepts: Categorizing food groups

Figure 4: Realia and Object Based Learning in Small Groups

Realia and objects permit hands on experiences for making direct connection between language and meaning in small groups.

Figure 5: Each Child Has Their Own Word Bank or 'Chest'

An individualized vocabulary bank from Family Treasures is developed for each child.

Figure 6: Celebrating our Young Partners as Authors

Our book launch event celebrates the efforts of everyone involved: SIPS

students, boys and girls at Almadina, their teachers, as well as parents. Each child

receives a literacy 'pack' containing their work portfolio for the project and a copy of all

the other children's dual language books at their table. These are also uploaded into the

website for future sharing, retelling and reading practice; as well as providing resource

support for other teachers who may be thinking of launching a book project. Our site has

been visited by thousands of teachers from all over the world.

Emergent Themes from SIPS Students' Writing: From Practice to Praxis

Three over-arching themes emerged from the SIPS students' reflections and

synthesis papers. These included: 1) the importance of an adult presence in small group

work; 2) the centrality of vocabulary and 'language first'; 3) the connection between

research and theory in driving instructional planning. Together these elements made for a

rich, meaningful experience for the SIPS students. Students' comments: 'this was the

most meaningful learning experience to date within this program;' 'I believe it should be

a required part of the BEd program' were echoed many times over by others in the class.

A caring and warm adult presence in the k – 2 classroom working with small table groups permits opportunities for far more 'kid talk', the development of trusting relationships for taking risks, the possibilities of tailoring instruction much more to the perceived individual learner needs in the group and engaging children in more hands on activities. These ideas are reflected in the following comments from SIPS students:

'By working with a small group of children, we were given the chance to make a difference for these young students. I could give the children the direct attention and support they individually needed. I only wished I could do such a thing in my practicum placements.'

'I loved the low student to teacher ratio this setting provided, which allowed for deeper relationships to develop quickly. The students also seemed to thrive from the added attention, especially when I would move around the table and provide one-on-one support.'

'I can take away from this experience the importance of creating relationships. They were engaged and I could build a group full of respect and trust in a short period of time.'

'I saw children taking a risk, reading out loud. That proved to me I had created a safe environment.'

SIPS students were clearly struck by a reading distributed and discussed early in the semester, *The Early Catastrophe*, (Hart & Risly, 2003), and their responsibility to intervene with explicit, direct, contextualized and targeted vocabulary instruction.

'Understanding the vocabulary gap these children have … the development of vocabulary is a central point. I wish I could have received this piece of advice in my first year.'

'I must directly and explicitly teach vocabulary. I particularly need to

intentionally work on more of the low frequency words for children. I need to

create push out tasks to ensure deep understanding of the new words.'

'I purposefully need to expose the children to *next words to know*. We created

generic word banks as well as personalized treasure box folders that they used to

keep their *next words to know*.

'I found myself inspired to increase the level of vocabulary exposure and rich

practice opportunities. This may require more planning and lesson development,

but the rewards seem so worth it.'

The value of connecting research to practice was the third theme to emerge.

'I finally got to put into practice what I had been learning about, as well as being

able to make real life connections to the literature I was reading.'

'The readings prepared me for project success by allowing me to be intentional in

planning and give greater consideration to the research-based strategies. I learned

the importance of recycling, scaffolding, the benefits of realia, artifacts and

hands-on learning.'

'This class was unlike any other experience in the Education program since there

was a direct connection between our on-site classes and our work in the school.

This was one of the greatest benefits of this class.'

In sum, the SIPS students found that their understanding of the needs of ELLs had

taken a sharp leap forward, due in large measure to the opportunity to work directly with

small groups of youngsters within a project that provided strong grounding in the

available research, and sufficient practical ideas for getting started from previous

iterations of the project (posted on the website), and extending with their own experimentation with 'what works'.

Concluding Comments

The dual language project fulfills the criteria of service learning by making clear connections between credit bearing course work and an identified need in the community. An array of learning artifacts provide evidence of the impact of this initiative on the quality of learning outcomes experienced by pre-service teacher trainees in their final semester of university. Reflection on their learning, as a key element of service-learning was integral to the university students' work, and opportunities for this were structured into the campus based experiences. The benefit of small group work emerged as the most salient feature of this service learning project that explains the mutual engagement for children and SIPS students alike as a transformative experience for both. These key features of the dual language project reflect principles 1, 4, 5, 7, 10 and 11 articulated by ACDE (2006) and again, included here in Appendix 1.

Next steps will include a more formalized research element. We want to document and measure the impact of our dual language book project on the vocabulary learning and literacy outcomes of our young ELLs. This requires a quasi-experimental design that would include pre-post measures and a comparison group of youngsters who are not exposed to the adult partners and the curriculum of the project at hand. The findings of this research will provide tangible evidence of the effects of service learning embedded in the dual language book project, not only on the pre-service teacher participants but on the children who are the focus of our efforts. Our work is dedicated to a transformative pedagogy that, in giving our young partners the gifts of language and

literacy, will empower them in realizing their educational goals and in turn, enhanced

educational success. Off to an early start is the key!

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Appendix 1: Principles of Initial Teacher Education

ACDE supports the following principles for initial teacher education in Canada:

1) An effective teacher education program demonstrates the transformative power of learning for individuals and communities.
2) An effective initial teacher education program envisions the teacher as a professional who observes, discerns, critiques, assesses, and acts accordingly.
3) An effective initial teacher education program encourages teachers to assume a social and political leadership role.
4) An effective initial teacher education program cultivates a sense of the teacher as responsive and responsible to learners, schools, colleagues, and communities.
5) An effective initial teacher education program involves partnerships between the university and schools, interweaving theory, research, and practice and providing opportunities for teacher candidates to collaborate with teachers to develop effective teaching practices.
6) An effective initial teacher education program promotes diversity, inclusion, understanding, acceptance, and social responsibility in continuing dialogue with local, national, and global communities.
7) An effective initial teacher education program engages teachers with the politics of identity and difference and prepares them to develop and enact inclusive curricula and pedagogies.
8) An effective initial teacher education program supports a research disposition and climate that recognizes a range of knowledge and perspectives.
9) An effective initial teacher education program ensures that beginning teachers understand the development of children and youth (intellectual, physical, emotional, social, creative, spiritual, moral) and the nature of learning.
10) An effective teacher education program ensures that beginning teachers have sound knowledge of subject matter, literacies, ways of knowing, and pedagogical expertise.
11) An effective initial teacher education program provides opportunities for candidates to investigate their practices.
12) An effective initial teacher education program supports thoughtful, considered, and deliberate innovation to improve and strengthen the preparation of educators.