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Service-learning in Language Education: Bridging the University-Community Divide

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Language instruction and the broader field of education have increasingly integrated service-learning as a pedagogical tool (Gascoigne Lally, 2001; Hellebrandt, Arries, & Varona, 2004; Jouët-Pastré & Braga, 2005; Jouët-Pastré & Liander, 2005). Our course, "Portuguese and the Community," was first offered at Harvard College in the spring of 2004. The course coincided with an initiative by the university to study and promote the creation of service-learning opportunities for students. A lengthy report on the Harvard College Curricular Review was released, in which 47 percent of all Harvard college students who responded to a survey reported that they volunteered in the community during the academic year. Yet, it was noted that there are limited opportunities for students to integrate public service activities with their course work at the university, with "Portuguese and the Community" being one of the few courses in which a public service component was included. The course thus became part of the university's Active Learning Pilot Project, which aims to divulge information about, delineate best practices for, and promote service-learning at Harvard University.

Service-learning Models

As Speck and Hoppe (2004) argue, service-learning is a complex area, with distinctive philosophies of practice and approaches. Deans (1999) compares two approaches to service-learning that are based on the more pragmatic school promoted by John Dewey and the more critical school promoted by Paulo Freire. The theories have many points in common, such as the requirement that participation and engagement be central to the process of learning. However, the outcome stressed by the pragmatic approach is a product that is aligned with and beneficial to the community in question, while the critical approach aims not only to understand but to transform the community, if necessary, through questioning and challenging its broader social context of race, class and ethnicity.

In creating the "Portuguese and the Community" course, we had both pragmatic and critical reasons behind its structure. As language educators, there was a pragmatic goal of using the class and the related service-learning activities as an opportunity for students to develop their language skills. We also had a critical goal from the outset, which was for students to understand and question the current immigration laws and climate in the United States and how immigrant communities and related organizations function within this context. New pragmatic and critical aims have emerged as we

approach the third iteration of the course, as will be discussed later in our Findings section.

The Course and Its Context

In New England there are three sizeable Portuguese-speaking communities: the Portuguese, the Cape Verdeans, and the Brazilians. Even though these groups share a common language, they are extremely diverse in terms of ethnic and racial background. Their processes of migration are also enormously different in terms of historical time and the immigration policies they found in the receiving country, which have impacted their experiences in settling, adapting, and making a new life in the US.¹ This diversity was important for us to research and understand in the process of organizing the course. Research included literature reviews, our own experiences of volunteering in the community, and organizing workshops that included academics and community representatives.

“Portuguese and the Community” is presented to students as an advanced language and culture course that examines Portuguese-speaking (Lusophone) immigrants’ experiences in the United States and seeks to promote community engagement as a vehicle for greater linguistic fluency and cultural understanding. As a course requirement, students are placed with Boston-area community organizations and agencies to perform four hours per week of service-learning. Class work focuses on readings covering many aspects of the immigrants’ experience through history, ethnography, literature, sociology, and linguistics. Films and documentaries by and about Lusophone immigrants and specific uses of Portuguese language from these communities are also part of class discussions. Finally, the course includes field trips to the immigrant communities and to related cultural events.

At the beginning of the semester, we invite to the class community-based associations that provide services to the Lusophone communities in the Boston area. They present their associations to students and explain what kind of jobs they have for volunteers. After this initial talk, students apply to positions at the institutions of their choice. Some start doing volunteer work immediately after the first interview, but others have to do two or three interviews before finding a good match between their and the organization’s expectations.

Students have the opportunity to perform a rich variety of jobs at the community-based associations. Work experiences include assisting in citizenship classes, human rights workshops, after-school programs for children of all ages, elaborating publicity materials to raise funds for associations, helping lawyers to assist immigrant workers, serving as medical and legal interpreters and translators, and working in HIV prevention programs. Generally speaking, the work experiences provide exposure to a world and a world-view virtually unavailable on campus to the Harvard University student.

Participants and Method

¹ The migratory history of these three communities are further detailed in Jouët-Pastré and Braga, 2005.

The course was originally designed as an advanced language course for undergraduates. However, during the first two iterations of the course, graduate students from schools of Education, Law and Government participated as well, both because of their interest in developing their language proficiency and because the course topic and service-learning organizations were related to their academic and professional interests. A total of 16 students have taken the course, with roughly equal numbers of men and women present in the class during each semester. There was one international student, with other students split between multiple-generation Caucasian-Americans or African-Americans and first- or second-generation immigrants of various ethnic backgrounds. Most students had visited at least one Portuguese-speaking country prior to enrolling in the course.

All students in the course during the Spring 2004 and 2005 semesters submitted journals and compositions.² These assignments were specifically described in the syllabus as opportunities for students to relate class readings and discussions to their practical experiences in the field. At the beginning of each class period, students had the opportunity to debrief about their experiences in the community. This was both a time for us to check on students' progress in their field assignments, and for students to collaboratively share experiences, problems, and solutions with each other. A follow-up interview (in person or via e-mail) was conducted towards the end of the course or during the following semester, as a means for students to further comment on their understanding of the Lusophone communities.

Findings

We structured the course from its inception as a vehicle for furthering our understanding of service-learning as well as the students' understanding of the Portuguese-speaking communities. Through our analysis of coursework and interviews with students we found that the course served a variety of purposes.

Developing linguistic and cultural skills

Students often indicated that they were taking the course for the pragmatic reason of developing their language skills:

This experience will help me a lot to improve my Portuguese
(CW – Journal).

However, as the course progressed, students expanded their notion of what it means to learn a foreign language, thus further valuing the contextual and cultural aspects of acquiring fluency. The same student quoted above later reflected:

I think that the best way to really know a language is to interact with it, and to have to be in situations where you need to work with it and you need to talk to people. And I think the best way to know-- Like language is so much more than just the words, it's also like the community and it's

² All assignments were written by students in Portuguese and later translated for this article.

also people. So being in a situation, like being involved in the community, it makes your language much richer (CW – Interview).

The student highlights the limitations of learning a language through traditional pedagogy that circumscribes the learning process to the classroom. She stresses the importance of struggling with the use of language in settings outside of the classroom, which makes her an active agent in her own learning rather than a passive recipient of knowledge.

Career explorations

While this was not a premeditated purpose for the course, we learned from students' reflections that they took the service-learning course to explore future careers:

I love working with children, but now I am very interested in exploring a career in Law. So, I decided to apply to work with either the Brazilian Immigrant Center or the Brazilian Workers' Center (SL – Journal).

For some students, the work at different community organizations helped them to better understand the careers that they considered pursuing after graduation. For those who had already settled on a future path, these experiences provided an excellent reference on their resumé. Various students asked the instructors for letters of recommendation, as they knew their service-learning work would be attractive to various schools, including schools of Medicine and Law.

Raising awareness about immigration and related policies in the United States

A major recurrent theme we found in students' writings was their lack of awareness not only about the Portuguese-speaking communities in the US but also about immigration in general. The course inspired various students to expand their knowledge of the current state of immigration and related policies:

After this semester, I want to learn much more about immigration to the United States, but I also want to work to better the situation of immigrants here (MC – Final Paper).

Students were puzzled by the way immigration authorities can foster, for various political and economic reasons, an ambiguous position vis-à-vis undocumented immigrants. This questioning came from both non-Hispanic white students who are multiple generation Americans and from students who are first- or second-generation immigrants. Journals and discussions during the semester reflected a progressively greater consideration of these issues:

All the news about immigrants gives people the impression that this country does not like immigrants and that they are a problem. In reality this country depends on immigrants, but for various reasons, we cannot allow everybody to immigrate to our country, but the government definitely tolerates a certain amount of illegal immigration (SL–Midterm).

Most students came into the course with primarily linguistic and cultural interests in mind. However, an unintended consequence for many of them was gaining an

understanding of implicit and explicit attitudes and policies pertaining to immigration in the United States, and how students' own views fit into this greater framework.

Going beyond campus life

We did not expect students to bring any prior knowledge of Portuguese-speaking immigrant communities to the course. Some students who grew up in the Boston area knew that such communities existed, yet this course was the first opportunity they had to interact with these unknown neighbors:

I think the course is a great opportunity to...look at a community from a course perspective, which I think is very valuable, especially for; I mean, I'm Caucasian and...I've grown up around Portuguese-speaking people for most of my life but this was a real valuable opportunity to study them as a coherent whole and understand...the history, basically, of this different group of peoples who...was living right next to me (AO-Interview).

Even more surprising to us was the fact that many students nearing the end of their studies at Harvard had not ventured far beyond the campus, and looked to this course as a chance to explore the broader Boston community:

A classmate mentioned that it's an opportunity to kind of venture out and experience more of Boston in general. It's amazing how you can very easily be sucked into, or just end up staying within the campus boundaries for a large part of your undergraduate experience. So this being my last term, I thought that'd be a good excuse, as well. Not a good excuse, but-- To venture out of it, as well throughout the city (AV- Interview).

Often times, liberal arts colleges become islands within a "host" city, but service-learning courses can provide critical opportunities to forge bridges and partnerships between universities and surrounding communities.

Questioning theories through practical experience

As the course progressed, students began to question the literature we presented about Portuguese-speaking immigrants and related theoretical frameworks. Using their practical experiences in the field, students elaborated new hypotheses to explain the experiences of these communities:

When I started to go to the Senior Citizens Program, I thought I would hear many nostalgic conversations about their native country (concept of 'saudade'). After spending many afternoons there I found that these conversations were nonexistent. The relationship that people there had with Portugal seemed more like a sort of club here than a relationship with Portugal there....My 'theory' basically explains the lack of 'saudade' for the Portuguese land as a result of a reconstitution of the Portuguese space within American frontiers (MB – Journal).

This students' understanding of *saudade* and her expectation of finding it in the community came from ethnographies about Portuguese immigrants in New England. Yet the disconnect between what she read and what she saw spurred further research and

observations pertaining to this concept. The combination of course readings, discussions, and practical experiences provided students with a forum in which they could simultaneously learn about and question what has been reported about these communities so far in research and in the media.

Conclusion

The argument that a course bridging theory and practice offers students a better understanding of the nuances and diversity of immigrant communities in the United States corroborates the findings of our colleagues in the field of service-learning (Jorge, 2004; Tilley-Lubbs, 2004). Bennett (2004), for example, argues that community-based learning helps students to develop a “new appreciation for and understanding of the existence of realities other than their own” (p. 66). Furthermore, several students who took “Portuguese and the Community” declared that the course challenged their views on immigration to the point that some of them included issues related to this phenomenon in their academic and personal projects. By exploring the presence of the Portuguese-speaking communities in the United States, and particularly in New England, students also explored their own preconceptions about immigration and national belonging and how these, in turn, influenced their own shifting identities as insiders and outsiders within the multiple layers of American society.

Endnotes

1. The migratory history of these three communities are further detailed in Jouët-Pastré and Braga, 2005.
2. All assignments were written by students in Portuguese and later translated for this article.

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