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Community Learning in Alcalá de Henares: Symbiotic Learning Blurs the Line between Teacher
and Students

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Abstract

This article about experiential learning explores the challenges and rewards of international service-learning within a Spanish community in Alcalá de Henares. The paper describes the author's experience as a teacher of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) in *Comisiones Obreras* (the "Workers' Commissions"). In order to teach adult learners English, the author developed a form of "symbiotic learning." This paper is part of the "From Praxis to Press" section of the journal.

During the 2014-2015 academic year I had the incredible opportunity to study abroad with the Bowling Green State University education abroad program in the city of Alcalá de Henares near Madrid, Spain. From September to May I called that town my home, and made many lasting memories there. My time abroad challenged and changed me in ways I definitely did not foresee, and I actually rearranged my future plans to accommodate returning to Spain as soon as possible. I hope to participate in a program that allows me to teach English as a second language to Spanish students, because while I was in Alcalá I uncovered a passion that I would never have known about if not for my service-learning course.

Service or community-based learning typically entails the participant engaging in one's community, usually in a non-academic manner, but with the intent to still learn something from the experience. Barbara Jacoby in *Service-learning Essentials: Questions, Answers, and Lessons Learned* defines it as, "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes" (1-2). In Alcalá, this was no different.

However, my experience still took place in the classroom. During my second semester in Alcalá I participated in a service-learning course from mid-January to the end of April through which I was given the opportunity to teach my own class in beginner's English to unemployed or underemployed adults. The class was held weekly at a local community center called

Comisiones Obreras (or CCOO, which means in English Workers' Commissions). The commissions function as a trade union and labor party/communist syndicate, although the political affiliation of the organization had nothing to do with our connections. The organization is dedicated to helping their members and the community at large in many ways; for example, some of the November/December activities for the Madrid CCOO (which is directly affiliated with the Alcalá CCOO and has a much wider reach) were: a public demonstration in defense of a school of music and dance in Madrid, a public demonstration in promotion of the International Day of Elimination of Violence Against Women, a conference about climate change and participation in the Global Climate March, and a meeting to discuss prevention of occupational risks. Clearly, CCOO organizations have a very broad spread, as the people involved have different issues and projects that are important to them. Providing free English lessons is just one way in which the CCOO intends to help their community. Interacting with this type of organization that has political ties as well as charitable outreaches was interesting and new to me. The focus on community is something you do not see every day in the U.S., and having the lessons we provided be open to anybody, not just members of the organization, was unfamiliar to me.

I was familiar with service-learning before my experience in Spain, having taken a service-learning course previously at BGSU, and while I appreciated both experiences, the results were dramatically different. My Bowling Green service-learning course revolved around non-profit organizations, and the service component entailed hosting and coordinating a conference for Northwest Ohio youth about social justice issues. The members of my service-learning class and I were responsible for everything concerning the conference, including fundraising, scheduling,

finding and hiring a keynote speaker, and more. My group partner and I worked closely all semester with a group of students from Bowling Green High School's Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) to form a panel focused on explaining how to start a GSA for other attendees to learn from so they could do the same at their school. This course was a wonderful experience, and I learned a lot about non-profits and what goes into the organization of such institutions and specifically about hosting conferences.

Interestingly, my experience at Bowling Green State University and my experience in Alcalá differed greatly. In *International Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Research*, authors Robert Bringle, Julie Hatcher, and Steven Jones state, "International service learning borrows from the domains of service learning, study abroad, and international education to create a new pedagogy that adds new and unique value from this combination" (i). I definitely agree that the international aspect of my Alcalá service-learning experience is what made the biggest difference. In Alcalá I came to understand service-learning at a deeper level, as I was shown how everybody involved in the process learns and benefits mutually. Living in Spain and understanding why learning English would help my unemployed and underemployed students affected my role as teacher because I knew that what I was doing could greatly impact their lives. The *service* aspect of service-learning was stressed to me at a much deeper level than before due to this new perspective.

I was the teacher of the elementary (or novice) level English class, so in preparation for the course I was to assume my students would have little-to-no prior background with the language, and it was necessary to teach the course entirely in Spanish. This immediately required a great

deal of skill and comprehension on my part with regard to the Spanish language, and I was grateful to have been studying in Spain for the entire previous semester. Among all the knowledge I gained in the classroom, being fully immersed in the Spanish language and culture was what had the greatest effect on me overall. The English class was held once a week, and during each session at the CCOO institute, anywhere from two to fifteen students were present. As the class members were not obliged to show up from week to week, the average class size during the fifteen weeks was around five or six students. The age range was wide, from a few college-age women to men and women in their fifties or sixties. We (as in myself and my peers who were participating in the same program teaching English courses at different levels of comprehension) were expected to have full patience with our students, and teach them to the best of our abilities. We were given no prior training in teaching (except for the education majors amongst the group) but we had a wealth of resources available through our teachers and advisors at La Universidad de Cardenal Cisneros, our home university in Alcalá. This was done so that the *learning* aspect to the service-learning course would be maximized to the full effect. This type of learning-by-doing is very different than what one is typically exposed to in the traditional classroom (that is, where the student is not the one teaching), but I learned so much more from the experience than I ever would have, for example, by studying pedagogic theory. As Jacoby states:

Learning can only occur if the learner is engaged. Boredom and disengagement during lectures and other traditional activities both inside and outside the classroom are commonplace. Service-learning is, by its nature, active learning. Because it addresses real issues and needs, students are more likely to invest time and effort in their learning (81).

I certainly agree that were I to sit down and try to conceptualize and theorize about how to teach English to Spanish adults with no background in the language, I would have been bored and more than likely at a loss. While I certainly tried to make lesson plans and assess what I might be teaching over the duration of the semester, it was not until I was actually in the classroom that I began to understand what did and did not work in the given context; in other words, as I put my own knowledge into practice in the English-language course at CCOO, my own learning began to take place.

During the first few classes I went over the absolute basics, such as translations for very common words and conjugations of very common verbs. My very first lesson was how to say and conjugate the verb TO BE, and we spent the whole class learning how to introduce ourselves and say a few things to describe ourselves. As the weeks went by, I began tailoring my teaching to how my students were learning, for example I would simplify verb conjugations after my students and I started noticing patterns. For both verbs and vocabulary, I would teach the word or phrase and have them repeat, sometimes multiple times back and forth if we were dealing with new sounds like in the word "run." Native speakers of Spanish tend to say *roon* with an 'r' sound that slightly mimics a 'd', so words like that sometimes took a bit of patience. At the end of the lesson I would ask my students to put together all that we had learned and try some practice sentences. After the first lesson all of my students were able to participate and share something about themselves as well as understand what their fellow classmates were saying. I could see the excitement and pride in some of their faces as they realized they were speaking to and understanding one another in an entirely new language, and I left that first day feeling elated that my students actually learned something. However, after a few weeks with lessons structured like

the first one, I began feeling like I was running out of useful material, and my students seemed to be getting bored.

I shared my frustration with my advisors during our weekly class meeting for the service-learning course, and after analyzing myself and the classroom dynamics, I realized that the problem was that I was teaching English the way I was taught Spanish. However, my students were not high school kids who had a minimum of two more years ahead of them to dedicate to learning the new language. These were people who already had a plethora of lived experience and really wanted to expand their skill set by learning a new language, and they probably didn't need to know how to say "lamp" and "light bulb." They wanted English they could use, and being able to understand and repeat real phrases was more important than memorizing a list of vocabulary words. I began to realize that there was a definite disconnect between foreign language teaching the way I learned it in American schools and the way I needed to adjust to teach it in Spain. Bringle and Hatcher state, "Service learning brings structured reflection to study abroad.... The nature of reflection is not a loose, free writing exercise, but a very deliberate and intentionally designed set of learning activities that are guided by the learning objectives" (12). This definitely held true, as each week I was forced to reflect on my experiences in my everyday life in the context of my position as a student studying abroad and as a teacher in a foreign language classroom. Through this reflection and its real life implications, I was exposed to different angles of approaching foreign language teaching as well.

Teaching the English class was challenging me and showing me how dynamic learning can be, and it also exposed me to the idea of how teaching changes in different settings. I finally asked

my students what they would be interested in learning, and the following lesson remains one of my all-time favorites: they wanted to know how to give and, more importantly, how to understand locational directions, for example, how to get to the grocery store. My entire new lesson plan thus revolved around a drawing of a city grid and started with vocabulary words relating to location and direction. I immediately ran into a problem with the language barrier because I didn't know how to say 'block' in Spanish, as in "go straight for two blocks then turn left." In Spanish, this is called "manzana," which is also the word for apple, so when I was describing and showing on my drawing what I was talking about, I initially thought my students were telling me "apple!" As a result, I too learned new vocabulary in Spanish. We continued with the lesson, and after introducing new vocabulary in English, and being taught several new words myself in Spanish, I moved on to helping them listen to and understand English directions. Throughout the lesson I used different circumstances related to a stick figure and the map, with the exercises and examples starting quite simply, and increasing in difficulty once my students could all follow along. I then increased my pace until I was speaking the way one would on the street, and they were still able to understand my directions. A few even tried a full conversation with me based on the new vocabulary they learned. That lesson remains one of my favorites because it was the first that really demonstrated to me how teaching is a very real learning experience that must involve the interests of the students. As I worked with different activities and communicated back and forth with my students to find out what was more useful to them and how to teach in a way that was accessible but still carried real-world significance, I was shown how the classroom could provide a very symbiotic experience. In other words, both I as teacher as well as my students gained new knowledge from the situation.

This modified "communicative" approach to foreign language teaching was new to me, and I found it to be very successful. Although I would provide my students with a wide array of vocabulary words and conjugations for many different forms of the verbs we learned, the class was in no way based on memorization. In *Transforming Postsecondary Foreign Language Teaching in the United States*, Janet Swaffar and Per Urlaub claim that foreign language teaching in American universities over the years has switched from "language through memorization and skill practice as necessary initial stages in language acquisition... to recent, student- and sociolinguistic-centered emphases in language." Surprisingly, despite this claim, I still personally only experienced teaching that is largely based on memorization, until one reaches the point at which students can communicate in the foreign language at a proficient level. I wanted to bring my students an experience that mirrored the proficiency-based communication level of learning from the beginning, rather than focusing on memorizing vocabulary words and verb charts. After realizing that the teaching method with which I began the course was not as effective as I had hoped, I modified my practices. Although this method was never exposed to me in the classroom while I was in high school or even taking Spanish courses at the university level, I feel it is the best way to teach students such as those enrolled in my service-learning course. The classroom dynamics were non-traditional, so the methods had to divert from the straight and narrow course as well. So, instead of focusing on memorization and the assessment of learning outcomes through quizzes and exams, my students learned what they wanted to know. The lessons that struck a chord and resonated with them in the classroom would stay with them in subsequent lessons. My students were actually engaged in the learning process, not just memorizing sounds. The most important question I ever asked them was "what do you want to learn?" Adapting my teaching to my students' learning style was pivotal and so influential to the

success of the course. Opening up to a new style of teaching allowed both my students and myself to take so much more away from the course.

The example I described of learning the Spanish term for "block" while I was teaching was an experience that would be replicated many times throughout the duration of the course, once I left a scripted lesson plan for a more dynamic, engaging, and useful style of teaching and learning. These were situations that I found quite fun to navigate, as I would have to explain the new element in Spanish well enough for my students to understand, then they would tell me the word in Spanish, and I would translate it back to teach them in English. This was another great aspect of teaching this course and an amazing learning opportunity for me, because I was being exposed to random aspects of Spanish vocabulary and learning unusual yet practical words and phrases. In each class I was actually gaining quite a bit of new knowledge--not to mention how valuable the hour and a half straight of speaking in Spanish was to me. I credit a big part of my advanced Spanish speaking skills to this course. In addition, I think it was particularly helpful for my students to see that I did not have a complete mastery of the Spanish language. On the contrary, I was still learning just like they were. In these moments, the line between students and teacher was blurred, and I think everyone involved learned something valuable from it. It can be intimidating to be an older adult with a younger teacher, but the language barrier, instead of creating a divide, brought us closer together as a group, helped us feel more comfortable around one another, and eased us into a better, more conducive way of teaching and learning.

The takeaway of my experience is that teaching and learning often takes place simultaneously. In the non-traditional classroom of my service-learning course, I was challenged to understand

how to navigate the line between teacher and student when my students were older than I, and I had to teach in a language that was not my own. This, of course, was a challenge I welcomed, and every week I learned something new, and I know my students did too. Learning is not a one-dimensional action; it can come in many different packages. My time in Spain and specifically the service-learning course helped me to develop skills to be a lifelong learner. Moreover, it uncovered a passion of mine I would not have known about otherwise. Week by week, in the service-learning class meetings I realized how I was very much embodying the positions of both teacher and student simultaneously. Being able to adapt my teaching style to something totally new and different from how I had been taught was an eye-opening experience, and one that I will recall when confronted with similar situations in the future. When I return to Spain I will remember these lessons as I embark upon teaching English once more, although this time I will be teaching a younger demographic in yet another very different setting. Nevertheless, I am sure it will be one which will in many ways mirror and in other ways differ from my initial experiences with foreign language learning and teaching. In my own practice, however, I know that the symbiotic learning will certainly continue.

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