DEVELOPING LANGUAGE EMPOWERMENT PROJECTS WITH DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

Colleen M. Fitzgerald
The University of Texas at Arlington
http://ling.uta.edu/~colleen
cmfitz@uta.edu

The Projects

I present on three different projects that integrate service-learning and offer insights in building community partnerships with diverse communities.

- Project 1: Developed ESL classes taught by university students in conjunction with a community service agency over a three-year period (Fitzgerald 2009).
- Project 2: Replicating parts of this approach in a new community by integrating outreach into a practicum course for MA TESOL students.
- Project 3: In progress. Developing a collaboration with Oklahoma tribes and institutions of higher education to work with Native American language communities. Planning stages involve a Spring 2010 course on sustainability and language endangerment that has an outreach component on this theme.

Models of Research

- From Cameron et al. 1992 (cited in Rice 2006)
  Empowering research: “We understand ‘empowering research’ as research on, for and with. One of the things we take that additional ‘with’ to imply is the use of interactive or dialogic research methods, as opposed to the distancing or objectifying strategies positivists are constrained to use. It is the centrality of interaction ‘with’ the researched that enables research to be empowering in our sense; though we understand this as a necessary rather than a sufficient condition … we [propose three] programmatic statement[s] and then pose various questions:
  - (a) ‘Persons are not objects and should not be treated as objects.’
  - (b) ‘Subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them’
  - (c) ‘If knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing.’” (pages 22-24)

Models of Research with Different Assumptions

- Ethical research. “In ethical research … there is a wholly proper concern to minimize damage and offset inconvenience to the researched, and to acknowledge their contributions. … But the underlying model is one of ‘research on’ social subjects. Human subjects deserve special ethical consideration, but they no more set the researcher’s agenda than the bottle of sulphuric acid sets the chemist’s agenda.” (pages 14-15).
- Advocacy research. “… the ‘advocacy position’ is characterized by a commitment on the part of the researcher not just to do research on subjects but research on and for subjects. Such a commitment formalizes what is actually a rather common development in field situations, where a researcher is asked to use her skills or her authority as an ‘expert’ to defend subjects’ interests, getting involved in their campaigns for healthcare or education, cultural autonomy or political and land rights, and speaking on their behalf” (page 13).

Empowerment Research Models

- Empowerment-based approaches to research proliferate with those working with diversity communities, using names like Participatory or Action Research, Community-based Research, etc. For example, this from Czajkowska-Higgins (2009)
  “Community-Based Language Research, as I define it here, not only allows for the production of knowledge on a language, but also assumes that that knowledge can and should be constructed for, with, and by community members, and that it is therefore not merely (or primarily) for or by linguists.”
- Working with the assumptions underlying the Empowerment Research model can better foster collaboration and trust-building. The community determines what is needed and what should be done.
Diversity in Higher Ed

- Service-learning can have a positive impact on diversifying universities and colleges and in credentialing students of color.
- Brownell and Clayton-Pedersen (2008) note that “underrepresented students of color now represent about 1 in 3 college students” and they “will lag behind in rates of degree attainment.”
- When service-learning as a pedagogy has been studied for underrepresented students (students of color, low-income, and first-generation college students), Brownell and Clayton-Pedersen rate these positive outcomes – if quality programming is delivered.
  - Improvement in grades (academic)
  - Civic attitudes change positively
  - Higher retention rates
  - (They do find some negative experience/“isolation as an impact.)
- There is at least preliminary evidence that in general, service-learning when done well can have a positive impact on retaining and graduating students of color, low-income students, and first generation college students.

Project 1: ESL Initiative

- Developed ESL classes taught by university students in conjunction with a community service agency over a three-year period (Fitzgerald 2009, forthcoming 2010)
- Course syllabus for Fall 2006 (HONS 3301 Language, Race and Equality) taught at Texas Tech University
- We worked extensively with Literacy Lubbock, a United Way agency, with existing ESL classes, and with local churches and schools that served Latino neighborhoods to build a tutoring program.
- At its peak, we had 4 classes team-taught by TTU undergraduate and graduate courses.
- Students met with the instructor once weekly and tutored 3-4 hours a week for 13 weeks.
- Multiple reflective components (weekly journaling, pre-service, post-service, several reflective exercises during service-learning, capstone/capstone with impromptu speeches)

How We Built a Partnership

- Started by finding what community organizations taught ESL and to see who they offered. Talked to them to see what they needed.
- Began small – students from TTU did independent studies and helped Literacy Lubbock ESL teachers.
- Created a planning committee with stakeholders who had different interests in making this happen:
  - Honors College wanted service experiences for students; diversity officer on campus wanted more diverse students and faculty; SL office and Center for Service Learning wanted more community involvement.
- Key contact was a local figure well-known in the Lubbock community for her educational outreach efforts. She set us up with the first off-campus site at a Latino church; our success there gave us a community seal of approval and soon others wanted classes at their churches or schools.

Project 2: MA TESOL Practicum

- Replicating parts of this approach in a new community by integrating outreach into a practicum course for MA TESOL students.
- Prior to Summer 2009, our practicum courses required 7 hours of volunteer teaching. I required 25 hours in Summer 2009.
  - Syllabus for UNG 5393 TESOL Teaching and Observation
- We raised the requirement to 45 hours of volunteer teaching in AY09-10, and it will be 60 hours in the next academic year.
- Reflective components are optional journal and a reflective paper.
Deliverables

- Last year, our department had very few service/volunteer hours to report. This year, 279 service hours. Fall 2009 semester alone, students and faculty contributed more than 400 hours from the practicum and other MA TESOL courses.
- Building connections with local agencies that serve non-native speakers and contribute to our highly linguistically diverse city.
- Developing a commitment to service-learning with other instructors in our program – Dr. Cindy Kibbi traded a lot of work on our Project Match and developed the Arlington Reads collaboration. Dr. Ejin Park brought in World Relief.
- Impact on our Program at UT Arlington
  - Professionalizing and credentialing our grad students.
  - Reconfiguring the MA TESOL program with more service requirements so that students can do up to 160 hours of volunteer teaching by graduation.
  - Our discussions for a BA Linguistics degree have included a requirement that students take a service-learning course in order to graduate.

Project 3: Native American languages

- Developing a collaboration with Oklahoma and Texas tribes and institutions of higher education to work with Native American language communities. Course involves doing a series of readings on language endangerment and revitalization (theory component) with involvement on one or two language projects in Oklahoma and Texas.
- Preliminary syllabus for LING 6390 Seminar on Sustainability and Language Endangerment online on:
  - http://ling.uta.edu/~colleen/S10_LING6390syllabus.html
- The service activities will be trips to do volunteer work on various language projects with tribal communities and higher education institutions.
- Reflective components will include reflection on engagement project activities before, during, and after each activity; reflective discussion in class as a group; critique and debriefing at semester’s end.

How We Are Building Partnerships

- We are trying to contribute to existing and ongoing programs of language revitalization and training that already exist in the Oklahoma context.
  - Dr. Akira Yamamoto holds an annual Language Revitalization Workshop for community members as part of the Symposium of the American Indian in Tahlequah (headquarters of the Cherokee Nation).
  - We are also working to help give a proliferation of need: many tribal communities in OK, languages are highly endangered, and there is no PhD program in the state of OK.
  - Making connections through a variety of networks asking what do people need from us, what could our students do for their community.
  - With Comanche Nation College, we offered support for their ANA revitalization grants in terms of our student and faculty effort. Consequently, there will be paid internship opportunities for our graduate students in Summer 2010 and 2011, as well as the service trip activities in Spring 2010.

Trip 1: Tahlequah, OK

- Language Revitalization Workshop and OWNAL (Oklahoma Workshop on Native American Languages)
  - Language information: last year, members from a variety of Oklahoma heritage languages communities participated, including Cherokee, Barth, Choctaw, and others.
  - Details/Activities: More details to come. Dr. Akira Yamamoto leads a team of people in the Language Revitalization Workshop, and he has a tremendous reputation for his work with Oklahoma tribal language communities. Last year’s Thursday evening sessions involved several teams presenting activities from their revitalization projects. The Friday morning session was an opportunity for everyone to present their work and for discussion. The Friday afternoon session was devoted to an evaluation of the day’s activities for the next year. Dr. Yamamoto has a reputation for his work with Oklahoma tribal language communities. The service activities will be trips to do volunteer work on various language programs. Saturday, we will come up for the children’s Outreach and Service activities as directed by the organizer.

Trip 2: Chickasaw Nation

- Chickasaw Nation Language Revitalization Program
  - Language information: According to the tribe, the Chickasaw language has approximately 120 speakers remaining. The language is classified as a Western Muskogean language.
  - Details/Activities: This trip will involve a combination of outreach/service activities and observing and meeting participants in the Chickasaw Language Revitalization Programs. Saturday, we will come up for the children’s language club and meet the kids. We will then spend Saturday and Sunday doing recordings for the Chickasaw program, based on materials they provide and with whose speakers they will arrange meetings. On Monday, we will attend the Chickasaw Language Committee’s monthly meeting. The Language Committee is doing lexicon work building new words. Following that, we will meet with pairs in the Master-Apprentice language program. We will return home Monday evening.

Trip 3: Comanche Nation College

- Comanche Nation College Language Revitalization Program
  - Language information: According to CNC, the Comanche language has fewer than 25 fluent speakers remaining. The language is classified as a Northern Uto-Aztecan language, in the Central Uto-Aztecan branch.
  - Details/Activities: This project is in need of input from people with linguistic sophistication — descriptive and applied, artistic ability/sensibility, computer skills, etc. It is difficult, of course, to know what is most needed on three particular days, however it will probably be some combination of the following:
    - The project will involve assembling photos and recordings into PowerPoint computer modules.
    - Assistance may be needed with some linguistics in acquiring photos, depending upon what stage the project is.
    - Assistance may be needed with the production of a comprehensive diagnostic exam and comprehensive final exam.
    - It is hoped that a partnership will be created with a local nursery school, and that some of the work will be involved in creating additional age-appropriate modules for pre-K children. Creative ideas will surely be welcome.
    - Assistance may be needed in development of materials to be used in connection with iPad(s) or other web development needs.
    - Assistance may be needed with the archiving of recordings and photos and creation of newsletters.
The Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas

- The Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas
- Language information: The Alabama language is classified as an Eastern Muskogean language, ISO 639-3 code [akz]. Coushatta is also an Eastern Muskogean language, ISO 639-3 code [cku]. According to Ethnologue, there is less than 50% lexical similarity to Coushatta (Koasati), significant differences in the grammar, and with Alabama listed as having 100 speakers in 1997 and Coushatta as 200 speakers in the 2000 U.S. Census.
- Details/Activities: The Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas (cf. these details in Handbook of Texas) has apparently expressed a need for assistance from linguists on their language projects. Further details forthcoming. (Working with Jack Martin of College of William and Mary to develop this trip.)

Other Possibilities

- I am trying to see if other possibilities might arise.
- Based on projected enrollment and funding for the travel (from a Graduate School grant), I'd like each student to participate in two trips.
  - Complication: scheduling dates, especially to reduce minimal conflicts with missing other course

Deliverables (we hope)

- Helping community members at the Language Revitalization Workshop to assemble materials for teaching their heritage languages.
- Recordings for Chickasaw Nation needs (online dictionary). Possible long-term relationship to contribute linguistic analysis of the language, particularly conversation structure.
- Language teaching materials and materials archived by best practices for the Comanche Nation College.
- And more…to be determined as each community wishes.

Extensions to Other Locations

- The location of The University of Texas at Arlington gives us unique proximity to the diverse indigenous language communities of Oklahoma, in order to work in an outreach/empowerment context.
- This model could be extended by working with local immigrant groups who speak minority/endangered languages and need assistance developing resources.
- Could also be extended in general to any immigrant language in the U.S., given the shift to English statistics.
- Keren Rice (p.c.) had students who worked with shifting language communities as part of a revitalization class at U of Toronto.

Assessing Outcomes

- Diversity survey (anonymous, administered online pre-service and again post-service to assess any attitude changes)
- Reflective writing – illustrating issues in the field and beyond.
- Collaborative conference presentations and publications (Hudley et al)
- Raising awareness of your institution, conferences and publications also help professionalize students and produce research (valued by our institutions)
- Documenting participation of students of color – and impact on degrees and future career/higher education plans.
- Professional skills like teamwork, grant-writing, technology use and training, communication.
- Grants? (Everyone loves grants in the current higher ed context.)
- Feel-good publicity for a university/college and a program/department.

Excursus on Reflection

- A necessary component in service-learning is reflection, which has been well-documented to demonstrate positive impact (cf. Eyler 2001, 2002; Eyler et al. 2001, Bringle and Hatcher 1995), if structured well for the student learning experience.
Cultivating Socially Minded Linguists: Service Learning and Engaged Scholarship in Linguistics and Education. Panel at American Dialect Society Conference, Baltimore, MD January 7, 2010

"Mapping Service-Learning Reflection" – as proposed by Eyler (2001:37)

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Reflective Prompts

- Examples of reflective prompts (Northwest Services Academy 2006: 9):
  - What is service? What is the difference between service and volunteering?
  - Has your definition of service changed? Why? How? Should everyone do service?
  - Describe a problem the team has been facing. List possible solutions.
  - Make a list of the skills used and learned on this project.
  - What have been the best and worst parts of this project?
  - Describe a person you ever on your project. What were their attitudes about the project, where might those attitudes have come from?
  - What community/identity groups are you a member of? How might this be related with your commitment to service?
  - Have you ever felt hopeless, despond, discouraged or burnt out related to your service? How have you dealt with this? How can reflection help?

- See Fitzgerald (2009, Forthcoming in 2010) for more examples of prompts used in the TTU ESL Initiative class (Project 1).

Reflective Writing and Diversity

- Reflective writing may allow students to reveal attitudes about themselves and others that might not emerge otherwise.
- One student (Latino background) created their own reflective prompt and wrote this in response:
  - Describe one thing you feel would make the rest of your life a whole lot easier. (student generated prompt)

- Their reflective response. If I could get the politicians to really understand where people with my background are coming from, I think it would be the greatest thing ever. Life would be easier if our political leaders understood that there are many ways for minorities to assimilate to mainstream culture without giving up their identity. The key to this is realizing that people who may not share all our views are not a threat; rather, I think that they enrich our perspective and provide a bigger window to the rest of the world especially when speaking about immigrants. Like stated in class, we should see other people who are different from ourselves as part of the team with the same goal that includes glory for everyone and not just a few.

Conclusions – Part 1

- Using the assumptions of Empowerment Research is helping us to create enriching pedagogical experiences for our students, to contribute to a variety of under-served communities (Native American tribes, immigrants in the U.S.), and to create opportunities for research and professional development.
- For students, allowing leeway on final projects can result in a variety of amazing products – some of ours include a fundraiser concert, a video documentary, various community surveys, and a website of reaching resources.
- Student outcomes also include career development and opportunities to show leadership skills and expertise that might not emerge in other opportunities where diverse backgrounds are not viewed positively.
- The empowerment components of these projects contribute to a more social and racially just society.
- They are often transformative for students. We might imagine the transformative effect on the academy if such approaches were inspirational and pervasive in our field.

And final advice...

- SB projects can be very time-consuming. The TTU project took a tremendous amount of my time in terms of meetings with individual stakeholders, site visits, etc. Junior faculty should be very, very cautious about starting such projects.
- Find a way to credential your activities in ways that your university values – and publicize it. Research, including scholarship on teaching and learning can be a vital component of success.
- Consider setting up IRB approval for SOTL activities. We did this with the Texas Tech project and I hope to do this with the Native American project at UT Arlington. (The reflective writing and diversity surveys in Fitzgerald 2009, Forthcoming 2010 were both done by collecting with IRB approval.)
- Create opportunities where your students can critique and offer constructive criticism. This will help your project develop positively and enhance the educational experience. Trust-building with students is also essential.
- Talk about what you are doing and network with others. I have found time and again that people find service-learning very inspirational.
- Institutions say they want it – but make sure how you do it will be in a way that meets your school’s tenure and promotion guidelines. Work smart!
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References
