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# The community<sup>1</sup>: an ideal space for learning

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## Introduction

Part of our mission as educators is to come up with innovative pedagogical tools and teaching strategies that enhance the students' learning experience by transforming their motivation into a meaningful personal engagement with their learning. On the other hand, the rising tuition fees, the pursuit of professional specialization and the institutionalized compartmentalization of the educational experience have exacerbated the student-as-consumer phenomenon, shaping an attitude toward learning and an approach toward teaching which often do not comply with the spirit of a Liberal Arts education. This attitude is even more pronounced when it comes to courses that students see as an easy credit or that they just *have to* complete in order to satisfy the distribution requirements<sup>2</sup> of their respective programs. Language courses often falling under this category, students' expectation from these courses is simply to enhance their written and oral abilities in the given language, and it is uncommon for instructors to incorporate in their teaching other elements of a broader and more meaningful educational experience, thus feeding and perpetuating the students' mentality.

In this paper, I will explore how the pedagogical model of academic service-learning, applied to language teaching, can inspire students to push their

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<sup>1</sup> By "community" I mean both society at large and the specific linguistic and cultural communities that students served in their respective placements.

<sup>2</sup> To avoid over-specialization, the University of Toronto, like many other North American academic institutions, requires that students take at least one course in programs other than the one they are specializing or majoring in.

engagement further. Drawing from my own students' experience, I will examine how this type of experiential learning has the power to make students take ownership of their learning and, at the same time, contribute to the transformation of the "consumers" of today into the "critical thinkers" and "citizens" of tomorrow by giving them the necessary tools to critically reflect both on their experience as autonomous learners and on their role in society as engaged educated citizens. I will also present evidence which indicates that broadening the scope of a course in such a manner does not "dilute" the core content of the course or the desired learning outcomes but, quite the contrary, seems to rather enhance the learning of the language by significantly elevating the students' engagement in the course and their interest in the material that is taught.

### **What is academic service-learning?**

Service-learning should not be confused with internships, volunteerism or other types of community-based learning<sup>3</sup> such as practical or fieldwork. Furco (1996) analyzes the differences in focus of these different models of experiential education. In *internship* placements, for example, the "primary intended beneficiary" is the student who, through the completion of specific tasks, seeks to acquire practical knowledge and develop specific skills that will be directly applied to a specific professional context. Their mission being primarily vocational, internships help train future professionals and do not primarily focus on the needs of the communities to be served. At the other end of the "experiential education continuum" (Furco, 1996), volunteerism is mainly focused on the needs of the clients of the hosting organization or agency rather than on the learning objectives of the volunteer. Academic service-learning, on the other hand, equally respects the needs of both the provider and the recipient. In their definition, Bringle and Hatcher (1995) underline the particularity of this pedagogical model which lies in the link between service and curriculum: service-learning is a "course-based, credit-bearing educational experience that allows students to (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 the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility." Directly related to course content and to specific learning outcomes, this model allows students to achieve their learning goals through service that, in turn, helps meet identified community needs. It's this reciprocity that characterizes service-learning courses and that is at the heart of academic service-learning experiences.

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<sup>3</sup> Community-based learning (CBL) is a broad term that refers to a teaching and learning philosophy in which students learn by being actively involved in community-based activities. The various CBL models give students the opportunity to make the necessary connections between classroom learning and the real world.

## **Rationale**

I decided to experiment with this pedagogical model, still underexplored in language teaching, in my FRED06 course (Spring 2010), which is an advanced French oral course. Except for the more “traditional” objectives of such a course, that any full immersion in a French-speaking environment would undoubtedly help reach, I wanted to offer students what I described before as “a broader and more meaningful learning experience”.

The more “traditional” – and expected – learning objectives were to enhance the students’ fluency, reinforce the accuracy of their oral communication, expand their vocabulary, improve their pronunciation and help them develop and refine strategies for increasing their aural comprehension; in other words, to strengthen their communication skills in French and enhance the effectiveness and accuracy of their oral expression.

The more “meaningful” learning outcomes were to make students realize the extent to which *they* are responsible for their learning by encouraging them to critically reflect on course content, on their own experience as language learners, on stereotypes, biases and assumptions that could potentially impede their learning; help them to develop a greater appreciation and capacity for intercultural communication and a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of their community; encourage them to critically reflect on their role and responsibilities as citizens and on the impact of their actions on society; teach them to act in a professional and responsible manner and to be reliable when counted on; better equip them to handle complex real-world problems; help them to take ownership of their learning by showing them that learning happens at all times and that it is a lifelong process, not something that is limited to the space of the classroom and the duration of their studies.

## **Course design**

In order to fulfill the service requirement for this course, students had to spend three hours every week in their respective community placements performing the tasks that each hosting agency had planned with me in advance, according to its mission and its clients’ needs and in line with the course’s desired learning objectives. Through discussions with the partner organizations, the students’ roles were defined in detail so that these learning objectives would be met. Partners committed themselves not to alter these tasks in the course of the placement without a prior discussion with me. The students’ responsibilities are described in detail in the next paragraph.

The in-classroom teaching portion of FRED06 (three hours a week) was dedicated to: (a) discussions and debates on the course readings; listening comprehension activities related to course content; correction of homework and assignments and (b) group discussions on the students’ experiences in their placements; peer reading and assessment of the papers in which they reflect on their experience.

## **The partners and the students' responsibilities**

In collaboration with the Centre for Community Partnerships of the University of Toronto, I partnered with three organizations for the student placements: *OASIS Centre des Femmes*, *Écoambassadeurs du Monde* and *Centre francophone de Toronto*.

*OASIS Centre des Femmes* is a non-profit organization for French speaking women. Its mission is to end violence against women in the Greater Toronto Area. It offers a variety of free services to francophone women aged from 16 and up, exclusively in French. Through counseling and other programs, the dedicated women of the *Centre* assist any woman who has experienced violence or abuse to regain control of her life and to be able to make choices again. The main goal of the *Centre's* intervention is to empower women by placing them at the center of their own decision-making. "Beyond its primary focus on violence against women, the Centre [...] also provides support to women who are immigrants, refugees or in search of employment."<sup>4</sup>

The female students that were hosted by this agency had to take part in the implementation of alternative therapies program: be part of the recruitment process, register the women to the activity, supervise the activity and participate in the evaluation process. They also participated in the organization of various workshops for women, animated focus groups, took part in the organization of March 8<sup>th</sup> celebrations for International Women's Day and did administrative work according to the Centre's weekly needs.

*Écoambassadeurs du Monde* is the first non-profit French-speaking organization based in the area of Toronto working in the field of the environment. Its vision is to bring together professionals, volunteers and the community at large for the protection and preservation of the environment through collaborations and partnerships. Its mission is to promote the development of a sustainable environment by implementing various indoor and outdoor practical and fun activities including public awareness, education, training and public engagement. The 3Rs (Recycle, Reduce, Re-use) and composting, healthy food, climate change and the conservation of natural resources, water and ecosystems are the priority fields of the organization<sup>5</sup>.

The students who chose *Écoambassadeurs* as their placement, assisted in delivering environmental educational activities, games and other resources to elementary and high school students in francophone schools in the Greater Toronto Area. Their tasks consisted of getting familiar with existing activities, games and other learning resources, assisting the program coordinators in planning in-class activities, engaging students and delivering activities and games themselves. They also had to research, analyze and select educational games for the general public as well. Finally, they had to provide feedback on

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<sup>4</sup> <<http://www.oasisfemmes.org>>.

<sup>5</sup> <<http://www.ecoambassadeurs.org>>.

how to improve the content of these activities and align it with the Ontario curriculum.

*Centre francophone de Toronto* offers a vast range of services to the French-speaking community of Toronto: legal aid services, health services, cultural and information services to welcome newcomers to the community, infant services, etc.<sup>6</sup> Students had to assist with administrative work for the Volunteer Program (filing, updating the database, making telephone calls, etc.); help organize workshops and special events for new immigrants; interpret for clients who spoke little or no English at appointments with Toronto Social Services; assist with the preparation of group activities, both in terms of logistics and content; animate “conversation circles” on themes related to the settlement of francophone newcomers to Canada and Toronto; make follow-up calls and send e-mails to check the progress of volunteers matched up with newly arrived immigrants through the Host Program.

### **The importance of critical reflection**

Although learning through experience is at the heart of service-learning, it is not experience alone that generates learning. According to Bringle and Hatcher, “Experience becomes educative when critical reflective thought creates new meaning and leads to growth and the ability to take informed actions.” (1999: 180). But what is *reflection* in this context? Simply put, it is “the process that helps students connect what they observe and experience in the community with their academic study” (Eyler, 2001). Serving as a bridge between experiences and learning, high quality critical reflection allows students to make connections between civic engagement and academic content, thus helping them realize the relevance of their learning experience. As a holistic approach to learning, critical reflection also helps students to learn about themselves since it engages them in a process where they are thinking on how they are actually thinking – not only as students for whom service will ultimately have specific educational outcomes, but also as citizens whose decisions and actions have an impact on the community and who interact with its members in a meaningful way.

#### *Maturing as learners through critical reflection*

Students were at first reluctant to accept the idea of critical reflection and uncertain as to how to tackle the topics they had to reflect upon in the papers that they had to submit on a bi-weekly basis. They thought it would be a mere expression of feelings and emotions that they were not necessarily ready to share, or a simple retelling of events and situations they had to face in their placements. The interactive workshop that I organized for them at the beginning of the semester was an important initiation to the concepts and principles of

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<sup>6</sup> < <http://www.centrefranco.org>>.

reflective writing, but it was mostly through the ongoing in-class discussions and peer assessment of their reflective papers that they came to realize that reflection is not “touchy-feely”; on the contrary, it involves critical thinking, reasoning and analytical skills. Students had to comment on the depth and the relevance of their classmates’ reflections, express objections as well as raise questions that needed to be addressed, etc. By sharing their success stories, anxieties, “failures”, “humiliating moments”; by identifying their weaknesses and personal learning obstacles and by working together to come up with possible strategies to overcome these obstacles<sup>7</sup>, students were able to monitor their progress and reflect on it. In doing so, they developed a more mature judgment and felt in charge of their learning. It was in part this realization of the extent to which they are responsible for their own learning that encouraged them to further invest themselves in the course. As one of my students states in the end-of-semester survey on the course:

I wasn’t a big fan of writing reflections before this course because they always seemed kind of cheesy, but I realized that if you really think about it, and then tell the truth (and not just write what you think the teacher wants to hear), you can actually learn a lot about your feelings, strengths or apprehensions about the experience. It is a way to physically put down your thoughts and use them to decide how you will most effectively move forward and keep improving your efforts towards the course.

This type of collaborative learning, further enhanced through on-line discussion forums, proved to be more than an interactive way to learn by reiterating course content in an authentic context, through the filter of unique individual experiences. It also served as an effective peer support mechanism.

Discussions about the placements were helpful”, writes a student, “because it gave me the chance to see how other people were handling their placements. If I had worries about something, chances were someone else had the same worry, and then we could talk it out.

Seeing the classroom not only as a venue for an intellectual exchange but also as a forum for a form of social interaction further helped the students to experience and to fully benefit from the social and interpersonal dimension of language learning while, at the same time, it helped promote a non-intimidating learning environment, conducive to active participation and spontaneous exchange.

Furthermore, by engaging themselves in this type of peer assessment and exchange through mandatory group discussions, and by bringing back to the class valuable information and reflections on their individual experiences,

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<sup>7</sup> Reflecting on her personal biggest source of frustration, one of my students writes: “One of the main things that this course has taught me is that it’s not about being completely grammatically correct at all times, it is just about staying calm and expressing your opinion naturally. Avoiding the urge to translate what you want to say, word for word, is really important as well.”

students assumed the role of “teachers”, which gave them an enhanced sense of responsibility and motivation. The course format allowed them to realize that they too have a role to play as “educators” of others in the broader sense of the term. They felt that they were not simple spectators or passive recipients of information. By describing, analyzing, drawing conclusions from and debating on the “lessons” they had drawn from their experiences in their respective placements, students felt – and rightfully so – that they were “teaching” both their classmates and me. Personally speaking, I learned a lot, through their interventions, about the needs of our community, the outstanding work of volunteers, new initiatives that are underway, etc. This reversal of roles was very empowering for students since it gave them a sense of leadership<sup>8</sup>. It was also very beneficial to me and to the dynamics of the course: it allowed me to foster a “student-centric” environment where information flew from students to their peers and from students to me, their instructor. In this context, I had the opportunity to engage myself in a true dialogue with my students, which they seemed to deeply appreciate and which I found to be extremely refreshing and constructive.

Students taking ownership of their learning in the context of a course is undoubtedly an important first step to becoming autonomous learners. But it does not necessarily mean that they have developed a genuine thirst for knowledge or that they see their learning as a lifelong process, as should be the case in a Liberal Arts education context. Extending their learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom was an experience that helped toward achieving this goal. The realization that any space can offer enriching learning opportunities and that learning happens at all times was perhaps one of the most valuable lessons that students got out of this course. They learned more about themselves by facing their own biases and prejudices and reflecting on them. Students also gradually demonstrated a greater ability to understand and respect ideas and perspectives that were different from their own. As they wrote in their reflective papers and shared with their classmates during the in-class group discussions, another important lesson they learned simply by having the chance to chat with refugees who had fled their country leaving their families behind, or with young mothers who had abandoned their household to protect their children from their abusive partners, was that they had to start putting things into perspective in their own lives. One of my students used to complain about the fact that her

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<sup>8</sup> Some of these students have already agreed to act as mentors for their younger colleagues next year, when the course will be taught for the second time. Some of their responsibilities will include: preparing and delivering, in collaboration with the Centre for Community Partnerships, the orientation session; sharing their own experiences in their respective placements; giving valuable advice to students in order to better prepare them and help them build their confidence; leading small group discussions throughout the semester and coaching the students on how to write better critical reflections.



parents would host for long periods of time family members from their country of origin who came to Canada for a better future. They “invaded her privacy” as she said. As part of her service, she had to help newly-arrived immigrants to deal with administrative and bureaucratic issues by acting as their interpreter in different social services. Experiencing first-hand the agony, helplessness and desperation that the language barrier could cause them, she admitted feeling “ashamed” for her selfishness. In her reflective paper, she wrote:

The man showed me a letter that he had received and that he was unable to understand. I helped him translate it; it was something so simple: how to obtain his driver’s license. It’s very hard to get by here without English, and I experienced this first hand last week. My mom has been in Canada since she was little and my dad came here at the age of 17, but many members of my family who arrived in Canada from Pakistan didn’t know how to communicate in English. Without my parents, who helped them find jobs and offered them a place to live until they were able to rent or buy their own house, food, etc., they wouldn’t have been as successful as they are today. This experience gave me the chance to appreciate all that my parents do for their family members who come from Pakistan. Many times, I get mad because there are ALWAYS people in our house and we cannot use our basement, but now that I saw the difficulties that this family had to face, I respect much more what my parents are doing. That day, I left the social service agency telling myself that I really want to continue to help people who only speak French or Urdu, even after this course ends.

### *Growing as citizens through civic engagement*

Serving the community was in itself a rewarding and eye-opening experience for students. Reflecting on the impact of their work on the lives of people whom they got to know and interact with in authentic communicational situations, contributed to their personal growth as individuals and citizens. In the course of the semester, their reflections became more and more refined; the quality and depth of their comments clearly showed that reflecting on their service had introduced them to a different way of seeing themselves and their role in the community. Even though many of them had previously been involved in community work, it was something they would do in a spontaneous, almost mechanical way. They had never actually stopped and reflected on the transformative power of this type of engagement both on others and on their lives. This experience helped them to develop a deeper understanding of complex issues such as social justice and change and provided them with opportunities to activate hidden leadership skills and to enhance their political consciousness.

A few of my students viewed their service as a moral fulfillment. One of my students who did her placement at *OASIS Centre des femmes*, and who is planning to continue to volunteer for the *Centre* by giving martial arts lessons for self-defense to women, writes:

I am glad that I was given the ability to help women in my community. I feel that I have accomplished a lot in that I have helped quite a few women feel more

welcome in Canada, and I also feel like they appreciated that I have taken the extra step to help them in their transition as new immigrants. This experience has just shown me how good it feels to know that you are helping someone out.

Others saw it as an opportunity to assume their responsibility as mentors for the younger generation:

I feel a little bit more accomplished now that I have given back a little to my community. I feel even better knowing that I got the chance to return to my own elementary school to educate the students on a very important subject - the environment. It was that sense of circular knowledge, of adults returning to teach children where they themselves were once students, that gave me a strong sense of civic engagement.

## **Post-assessment**

### *The challenges*

Designing, putting together and coordinating this course had its challenges. One of them had to do with finding exclusively French-speaking partner organizations in Toronto interested in hosting, training and supervising volunteers whose work had to be directly linked to specific educational outcomes. This requirement was, and understandably so, a restrictive factor for the community agencies.

Commuting was another problem, this time from the students' perspective. Almost all of the students live either on campus or close to it, which is far from the downtown Toronto area where all their placements were located. It was easily a three-hour commute each week, which a few of the students found very demanding of their time, especially during the exam period. I am currently working on finding placements closer to the campus to address the students' concern about their time limitations.

Exciting all students and getting the shiest of them to open up was another challenge that I had to face at the beginning of the course: "I did not have any confidence in my speaking abilities, and I would try whatever possible to avoid speaking" writes one of my students, thinking back on her initial reaction about the service component of the course. Their mandatory weekly immersion, but also peer support and the on-going in-class dialogue, proved to be key to helping students like this one to overcome their reservations and the psychological barrier that their lack of fluency was raising, impeding their learning. In her final reflection, this same student admits:

The in-class discussions helped me grow as a student. Last semester I took FRED01, an advanced French course offered at UTSC. Although I received a good mark, I feel that my mark was solely reflective of my written abilities, and did not reflect my oral skills at all [...]. I dreaded the service learning of the course [...]. I don't think this is how an upper-year student should feel at all. By their fourth-year, they should be comfortable enough in their new language to be able to switch back and forth between languages at ease. They shouldn't dread the

task or feel anxious [...] After my experience with service learning, I definitely feel it is important to have a service component in upper-year language courses. I feel that a service component will allow these students to better adjust to the language and get the much-needed practice.

Considering that this was the first time I was working with these partners, one other challenge was to ensure that our agreement on the students' tasks at the placement institution, which were designed to meet specific learning outcomes, was respected throughout the placement. In one instance, for example, I realized that a student had been assigned, for two consecutive weeks, responsibilities that did not comply with the course's objectives: he was asked to draft *in writing* a document in support of activities that would later be carried out orally. Although this activity was interesting, strictly speaking, this was a breach of my initial agreement with that organization since we had agreed that all activities would be oral-based given the scope of the course. On a more personal level for the student himself, this was jeopardizing his learning experience. This was resolved by simply addressing the issue with that specific agency, but this made me realize that regular follow-ups and a close monitoring of all placements were necessary.

### *The joys*

In comparison with other classes I have taught at a similar level, the students enrolled in FRED06 demonstrated significantly higher performance levels than their peers in other courses, in all areas of competence: fluency, aural comprehension, accuracy of expression, pronunciation, etc. As for their own assessment of their progress, they unanimously agree that this experience was catalytic: "I can only imagine what my skill level for French would be now if I had spent four semesters, instead of just one, in Service-Learning courses" writes one of my students.

Also, seeing students express a genuine interest in pursuing volunteer work for the organizations where they did their placements is a token of the effectiveness of the service-learning model on shaping engaged citizens. "Catching" them speaking French to one another in the corridors and seeing them seize every opportunity for a more personalized social interaction with their French-speaking supervisors and other volunteers in their placements (outings, informal get-togethers, etc.) as a way to further improve, shows that their experience acted as an intrinsic motivator. Reading in their end-of-semester final thoughts that, despite the extra workload, this course was "one of the best and memorable courses [they] have taken in [their] university years" leads me to believe that students thoroughly enjoyed community-based learning.

Asked to comment on the impact of service-learning on language learning in general, students stress the benefits of community-based courses for language programs:

The service-learning portion of this course was one of the greatest most beneficial learning experiences I had in all my education and I feel it is something that should move into other French courses and I also feel it should be a mandatory portion of major or, at the very least, specialist French programs. It is the most practical way to practice a language and all those graduating with the desire to be bilingual or holding a bilingual job should have the opportunity to practice in a real-world situation.

I absolutely believe that all language programs should have at least one service-learning course [...]. It is clear that they [service-learning courses] provide a unique experience that cannot be found in a simple classroom environment.

## **Conclusions**

This educational “experiment” allowed me not only to achieve the instructional goals that I had set out for this course, but also to broaden my portfolio of teaching strategies for the delivery of language courses within a broader Liberal Arts program. At the same time, on a more personal level, it gave me the opportunity to develop a closer relationship with my students in this class than I typically do in other more “traditional” classes. Lastly, by sharing their personal experiences and insights on their community work, I came to a better understanding of important social issues in our community. As a result of setting up and teaching this course but, more importantly, as a result of engaging myself in the honest and refreshing dialogue with my students that I was able to cultivate and promote thanks to this course format, I feel I have grown as a teacher and as a person. Finally, this experience also confirmed what I had realized in many other instances throughout my teaching career: it’s not motivation that students lack, but rather the tools to channel this motivation into a meaningful learning experience.

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