

*Successful Spaces of Empowerment*  
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This session will explore how a service learning class can become an opportunity to empower marginalized students and provide them with opportunities for success. This success can be seen in expanded personal learning potential, improved intercultural communication competency, and an opportunity to become an active agent in a reciprocal learning environment. Although the evidence in this workshop derives from an English as a Second Language (ESL) service learning class at Edmonds Community College in Washington State, throughout our discussion I will draw parallels to the application of this model to other student populations. The session will conclude with small group discussions of questions related to your students, their potential assets, and how these assets can best be matched with service learning sites to achieve the goals discussed.

How do you define learning? What do you expect a learning situation to look and feel like? What do you believe you personally need to bring into a learning experience for it to be successful? In order to expand a student's personal learning potential, it can be extremely helpful to broaden her or his definition of learning. What better place to do this than in a service learning class? Like many service learning classes, my Partners in the Community class, which Peter Martin developed and taught for many years, inverts traditional learning expectations. Instead of having a single teacher in a classroom, students are immersed in the larger community with many people who are simultaneously helping them to learn. Instead of relying on books and lecture notes, students are required to spontaneously react to rapidly shifting information sources. For example, if students are volunteering in a Head Start preschool, their learning might occur through a child's correction of their pronunciation, observation of the manner in which adults in the classroom react to negative behavior, and their own need to verbally respond to

multiple questions, most of which cannot be predicted as easily as they can within the environment of a structured college class.

However, it can be challenging to convince certain students of the validity of non-traditional learning. I usually have at least one student per quarter who protests, “I can’t learn about culture from little kids!” It is crucial to explore this assumption in detail with my class because on the surface it appears deceptively true. Nevertheless, if left unchallenged, this assumption will severely limit how much and how effectively students can learn at their service sites. In class, we discuss the fact that while children cannot elaborate on the abstract aesthetics of a particular culture, they do concretely model behaviors and expectations that their particular culture values.

One of the proven benefits of service learning classes is improved intercultural communication. Susan Cipolle notes that when students work in a pluralistic setting, they are challenged “to speak effectively and persuasively in representing their views as well as listen and hear what others say in order to understand multiple perspectives.” For my ESL students, this challenge is compounded by linguistic issues. Not only does communicating at their service learning site help my students develop their English skills, but it also improves their ability to communicate with people whose beliefs, appearance or background might vary from theirs. At the same time, the community partners working with these students are improving their own intercultural communication skills. However, Cipolle warns against the dangers of pursuing service learning with a savior complex, intentional or otherwise, as this does not allow for reciprocity and encourages paternalism rather than partnership and true communication.

The empowerment of marginalized students, which occurs when they engage in reciprocal learning, is crucial to the development of both their individual learning potential and

their communication skills. While many of the students in my class might be privileged in their home cultures or countries, they are not privileged in their current position as ESL students in an American community college. In the U.S., English is the language of power, and my students are not fluent in it. They lack an extended network of friends and family in the community where they currently live. Moreover, they are often excluded from the smaller but vibrant college community because they are only taking courses in the ESL department; sometimes they feel unable to bridge the cultural gap between themselves and American students.

How do we turn what might be perceived as students' weaknesses into their strengths and yet still achieve learning in the target area(s)? Take the example of my class. Given the nature of Partners in the Community—listed as an advanced ESL speaking and listening class--it is easy to determine an area of weakness that all students in this class share: their English skills are not yet fluent. At first glance, this lack of fluency appears to be a major deficit when attempting to engage in service learning. Service learning should be a reciprocal experience, benefiting both the students and the community partners. In the search to create a reciprocal experience, it is useful to borrow from the research of John McKnight, professor of education and social policy at Northwestern University. He has based his 30-plus years of work on the principle of asset-based community development. McKnight's approach focuses on the assets within communities and how these assets can be used to address what others outside a particular community might regard as deficits (Sills). Examine the supposed "deficit" of my ESL students more closely. Why do these students lack fluency? They are learning English because they came to Washington State from another country, a place whose language and culture they are already fluent in. Interestingly, they are fluent precisely in the area where they appear weakest: their linguistic and cultural knowledge. Participating in a service learning class places these ESL students on more

equal footing with others in their adopted community. Suddenly they are regarded as resources on language and culture and not simply as students struggling to attain fluency.

Therefore, when I approach potential community partners, I stress that our students will be bringing two benefits to this exchange: their willingness to help and their cultural knowledge. The community partners are providing an invaluable opportunity for my students to practice English with native speakers in real-life situations. This enables the students to improve their target skills for this class. The students, for their part, are bringing first-hand international knowledge and intercultural interaction to people who are currently unable to travel (elderly assisted living residents, children in Head Start, school-aged children in after-school programs, etc.). The students' "deficits" are actually assets that can empower them to become active agents in their service learning experience.

Successful service learning is reciprocal precisely because it creates "opportunities for all people in a community to practice respect for diversity[,] and it allows "all people in a community to participate in the solution," as Cipolle argues. This empowers both the students and the partner organizations. McKnight, too, claims that integration is crucial between those providing the service and those receiving it; this is the only way in which "substantial change" can be attained (qtd. in Sills). This is the kind of change that expands personal learning potential and improves intercultural communication skills.

Although you probably have many non-native English speakers in your classes, the students you perceive as marginalized might be very dissimilar to mine depending on your course content and demographics. However, you can use service learning as a component in any class to empower marginalized students. Research supports how "transformative" service learning can be for "Latino students and students of color" (Morales). The key to that

transformation is the opportunity to participate and contribute to solutions as someone whose assets are valued. This is true for any student, marginalized or not. Begin by focusing on your students' assets; allow them to inform how you structure service learning experiences.

Unfortunately, it is easy to focus on what students lack as they begin a course—after all, students are presumably taking a course because they need to learn the course content. But every student also brings certain skills and experiences with them. Think about some of your students who are struggling with the course content. Could the same students have other abilities, like extensive software knowledge? Excellent interpersonal communication skills? A background in creative design or strong math skills? Try to use these skills as the basis for positive service learning placements. As Marisol Morales makes clear, “[c]ommunity engagement through service learning gives us practical experience and professional connections, but more than anything it gives us community.” Healthy communities, like sustainable service learning partnerships, are reciprocal and empowering.

We need to actively promote service learning as an opportunity for *all* students. The typical paradigm of privileged students serving disadvantaged clients can be dismantled by equally valuing both the assets of the students involved and their community partners (DiMaria). This will create a kaleidoscope of reciprocity reflecting the diverse goals of our students, our classes, and our community partners.

## Works Cited

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