

Gardening Hope: How a Tutoring and Native Garden Project Impacted Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

This article focuses on reflections written by 14 participating pre-service teachers during a service-learning project in our nation's poorest neighborhood for its size. Participants engaged in one-on-one tutoring, a garden project, and an education class for three weeks from 3:30 to 9 p.m. The university class, Literacy and the English Language Learner, was at an after-school tutoring agency close to the Mexican border. The six themes emerging from a qualitative analysis of my students' essays were: caring support, social justice, prejudice reduction, hope, impact on teaching, and joy. The lenses used to analyze the data were social constructivism and reconstructivism.

Introduction

How does participating in service-learning (SL) affect teachers to be? How do tutoring, gardening, and participating in a university class in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood for over five hours a day impact these pre-service teachers? This article attempts to answer these questions with social constructivist and reconstructivist lenses. First, it describes the SL project, the community setting, and the theoretical framework. Next, it includes the research methods, data sources, and results. Last, it provides the educational implications and next steps.

The Service Project

Class began on May 15 and ended on June 2, 2006. From 3:45-5, my students tutored children at an after-school tutoring center in a neighborhood close to the Mexican border. Each participant tutored one to two tutees from Monday to Thursday. From 5-5:50, we planted and mulched a community vegetable garden and a native plant butterfly garden at the agency. After we planted and had refreshments, I held my methods class, "Literacy and the English Language Learner" (ELL) at the center from 6-9. Classes consisted of my mini-lessons on English as a second language theories and methods, pair strategy presentations, and discussions. This was the first time our community college/university, or any post-secondary institution, offered a class in the neighborhood.

I decided to combine gardening with tutoring because I wanted my students to make concrete connections to course concepts, e.g., working with children of poverty; being advocates for ELLs; theories and concepts for teaching culturally diverse students and ELLs; and literacy methods to challenge and motivate diverse learners. They had to create and execute lessons involving our gardening project in some way. For instance, pre-service math teachers created lessons about the diameters and circumferences of the holes we dug, as well as the area and

perimeter of where we planted. Science majors created lessons about ecology, botany, and the life-cycle of butterflies, and English majors had their tutees read and write about different facets of the gardening project. Also, in their written reflections, participants connected what they were learning from the tutoring and gardening facets of the SL project to course concepts.

The University of Texas at Brownsville has an SL focus and is part of the Texas Campus Compact, a higher-education organization for service-learning, civic engagement and community service. Without my university's Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) grant of \$500, we would not have been able to buy garden equipment, native plants, scavenger hunt prizes, and goodie bags for the children. Moreover, the CCE also provided a master naturalist/master gardener who tilled the soil and who taught me about native plants. Also, a local company and the city's Department of Public Works donated compost and mulch from their reserves and local agencies and churches used pick axes to break up the clay-like soil before it was tilled. All of these things were in place before my students and their tutees planted.

The Setting

The research site, on church grounds, has been an after-school tutoring center for several years and a place for religious education classes. According to U.S. Census 2000, the colonia where the SL research took place was the poorest for its size in the U.S.A. (Feldman, 2000). "Colonia is a Spanish term for neighborhood or community. In Texas, colonia refers to an unincorporated settlement that may lack basic water and sewage systems, paved roads, and safe and sanitary housing" (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, No Date p. 1); according to the same source, Texas colonias sprang up during the 1950's or before, when developers created unincorporated subdivisions from valueless land.

Even though the neighborhood is well within city limits, it has never been incorporated. When anyone in it calls 9-1-1, the county sheriff department, not city police, responds. Furthermore, even though the neighborhood is the oldest colonia in the United States (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2005), street lights are scarce. In fact, the CPL Electricity Company, not the city or county, is going to pay the energy costs for 84 street lights that the state purchased, but that were never installed (Martinez, 2008). Furthermore, only within the last 10 years were the streets paved – by the county.

One can argue that because of the treatment it has received from the city, the neighborhood has suffered from a low self-esteem. In *Revolution from Within*, Steinem (1993) discussed how a country can feel valueless and can have a collective low self-esteem. A low self-esteem, Steinem argued, is the result of many factors, including repeated neglect and poor treatment by others: "After all, we know that if children are treated badly for long enough, they come to believe they are bad" (Steinem, 1993, p. 21). Indeed, many of the children whom my students tutored reported that their classroom teachers either treated them badly or gave up on them when discovering where they lived.

Perspectives

For pre-service teachers, SL can provide an important lived experience with children. Social constructivist learning theory supports SL research, because, according to Dewey (1938), students learn by doing. Indeed, 90% of what we retain is done by our active engagement (Woods, 1989). According to best-practice research, students internalize information when they are engaged in creative tasks and hands-on learning (National Research Council, 1999).

Reconstructivism, which draws on Dewey's idea of individuals within a social context, was also an important aspect of the research. I was interested in whether participating pre-service teachers saw themselves as change agents (Giroux, 1985). I wanted to discover also if students' understanding of poverty transcended from a local issue to broader structural inequalities. Thus, Freire's (1970, 1998) discussion of poverty as system-based played a key role during data analysis.

Since I learned about Freire and Giroux in my doctoral classes over 15 years ago, I searched for ways I could make a lasting difference as an educator. SL matched my theoretical beliefs and the change of which I longed to be a part. When I attended my first SL workshop (Zlokowski, 1997, 1999; E. Zlokowski, personal communication, June 11, 2003), and discovered the importance of combining community engagement, students' written and oral reflections of their experiences, and course content. In fact, Rowls and Swick (2000) analyzed 11 teacher education syllabi that focused on SL; they found that student reflection linking course objectives to the service was one of the most important aspects that made SL meaningful. In their study of 260 college students participating in courses involving service learning, Parker-Gwin and Mabry (1998) corroborate these findings, but also discuss the importance of long-lasting relationships between community organizations and faculty members.

When professors design meaningful SL projects, university students and those being served can benefit because these types of experiences require students to learn about themselves as they learn to care for those around us (Coles, 1993). This type of caring about others in meaningful, responsible, and reciprocal ways (Noddings, 1990, 1992; Wuthnow, 1995) are just some of the benefits of SL. For example, in her study of 65 pre-service teachers, Boyle-Baise (1998) discovered that SL not only exposed her students to cultural diversity, but it also helped them to empathize with others and to affirm their diversity. However, Boyle-Baise wrote about her disappointment in students' lack of critique about poverty.

I applied what I learned from Zlokowski, Rowls and Swick, Parker-Gwin and Mabry, and Boyle-Baise to my SL course and research. I wanted my students to question social inequality and to identify "the causes that result in the need for their service" (Parker-Gwin & Mabry, 1998, 289). In the following methods and data sources sections, I explain how I designed the SL course and research.

Methods

Out of 17 students enrolled in my class, 14 agreed to participate in the SL project: two males and 12 females. Thirteen were Mexican American and one was European American. Three sought grade 4-8 certification and 11 sought grade 8-12 level certification. There were eight math, five English, and one science majors. Participants completed the pre-reflection on May 15, our first class session. They wrote three process reflections from May 17 to May 29 and a final reflection

after our culminating celebration on May 30. Each completed essay varied from three-fourth of a page to six pages because I did not have a page stipulation. Students were asked to respond to every facet of a question and demonstrate effort and depth.

For coding, I created a database in Excel, in which I typed each participant's pseudonym, her/his quote, and a possible theme that matched it. Sometimes a quote fit several themes. I coded everything from the essays because I wanted the results to be data-driven. I organized quotes into themes using the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser, 1965) as a grounded theory approach to data analysis. Initially 31 themes emerged. However, I collapsed categories when I realized they were the same theme. For example, the impact on teaching theme was a combination of these initial categories: application of course concepts, learning about teaching, ESL theory and methodology, interdisciplinary teaching, matching lessons to needs and interests of children, high expectations, and the importance of one-on-one contact with students.

It is important to note here that this analysis is strictly qualitative. I made no attempt to tally themes to find the most important one because I was mostly interested in what my students learned from this SL project. Thus, my presentation of the themes in the findings section is not in numerical order.

Data Sources

Each participant's pre-reflection, three process reflections, and final reflection were the primary data sources. This process-product approach and my essay prompts come from Zlokowski (1997, 1999; E. Zlokowski, personal communication, June 11, 2003), as well as from the research of Rowls and Swick (2000) and Parker-Gwin and Mabry (1998). What follows is a description of the assignments the SL students completed.

Pre-reflection:

- Major and grade level certification
- Experience with SL
- Experience teaching or working with children
- Experience gardening
- What days and times do you plan to tutor at this site?
- What are your impressions so far of the neighborhood, the director, and the students? What did you see and hear that gave you these impressions?
- What skills do you think you'll need to tutor the student and to help with the gardening project?
- What do you think the clients/kids will be like and why?
- What do you think you'll learn from them?
- What do you think their parents will be like?
- What anxieties or questions do you have?

Three Process Reflections: Process reflections must be spread out and completed at least three times after your interaction with the tutee:

1) Description: Summarize what you did.

- 2) Reaction: How did you feel and react? What did you learn about yourself, your biases, and your assumptions?
- 3) Intellectual Analysis: How can you better understand #s 1 and 2 using our course textbook and concepts? How do your descriptions and reactions relate to our class?

Final Entry: to be completed at the end of the entire project. Reflect on your pre-reflection, assessments, interview, two lesson plans, process reflections, and the garden project. Please answer all questions:

- a) What have you learned from this project about teaching and learning?
- b) What have you learned from this project about SL?
- c) What have you learned from this project about this program?
- d) What have you learned from this project about the tutee?
- e) What have you learned from this project about this neighborhood?
- f) What have you learned about yourself?
- g) What SL projects could you get your students involved in that relate to your content area?

Results

1. Caring

The six themes emerging from data analysis were, in no set order: caring, social justice, bias reduction, hope, impact on teaching, and joy. For the first theme, the center appeared to be an indispensable place for caring support in which the program director, children, and pre-service teachers contributed to, learned from, and responded to others in reciprocal, meaningful ways (Noddings, 1990, 1992). The director of the after-school center demonstrated caring by requiring that the children show her their report cards every marking period, visiting the children's homes, performing plays and musicals with them on her own time, and leading AI-anon workshops. Every participant wrote about the passion, devotion, and advocacy that the director demonstrated. This impressed and inspired them. Generosa, a math major, wrote: "I learned that there are good people in this life who give their lives for these kids, such as [the director]."

Additionally, participants wrote about how they saw themselves as a support system for the children in terms of homework help and college student role-models, who like the children they tutored, were Latinos/as, (with the exception of one White male participant). Yet more importantly, these pre-service teachers realized that they could "make a lasting impression in ... students and that this impression is primarily based on personal connections and care" (Abey, English major), and that they "can teach students to love the smallest things in life such as a flower" (Sega, math major).

This love and appreciation for nature and the children influenced these future teachers, perhaps more than any of the strategies I taught them. As Wink (2005, p.167) tells us, "It's true, love trumps methods." In the following quote, Ana, an English major, describes the embodiment of love when she first entered the center the first day of our class: "Once I stepped into the room, I felt love in the atmosphere."

However, in an “environment of caring” the cared-for must also demonstrate support and sharing (Noddings, 1990, 1992). The children at the center showed their effort and enthusiasm, as described in this quote by Sherry, math major: “Students at [the center] really do want to put the effort to learn and be part of something. They want to belong and they want you to believe in them ...” Janie, also a math major, wrote this about her tutee: “She enjoys feeling needed and that she too can help make the garden a beautiful success.” Participants also mentioned the mutual trust and friendships between them and the children. Lanie, an English major, wrote: “They really get attached to you and look up to you not only as a teacher, but as someone they can trust and count on.” Last, Reeve, a math major, demonstrated the reciprocity of caring between her and her tutee in this quote: “I have also given them pencils from the university and Starfire gave me a bracelet she made from scratch.”

2. Social Justice

The caring my students and their tutees experienced related to the next emerging theme, social justice, defined as a fight against oppression and a desire to change society’s structure to make it more just (Lin, 2001; Giroux, 1985, 2005). Using this definition, a system-based view of oppression takes precedence over inequalities as individual problems (Freire, 1970, 1998). Social justice also involves a critical orientation to race, ethnicity, and economic inequalities (Boyle-Baise, 1998). For this theme, I noticed that participants not only became aware of structural inequalities and other forms of mistreatment of our earth and its inhabitants, they also critiqued it and had specific plans for action.

Sega, a math major, made a connection between caring and social justice from a required class reading:

Caring is really important to motivate the student. As the article, ‘Conversations with Miguel’ stated, teachers need to care in order for students to learn. If we provide the care the students need, I am sure we will have successful Hispanic children that may occupy important positions in Washington. They may fight for important education issues that will make a difference for the nation.

Sega’s quote showed the relationship between caring and social justice, which Wink (2005, p. 167) tells us, are part of a “new dynamical pedagogical whole,” not polar opposites. Furthermore, Lin (2001, 110) states, “When people sincerely care about others, they find ways to treat them justly, fairly, and equitably.” Moreover, when they care about others, as Sega did for her tutee, they tend to recognize more quickly if the cared-for are being unjustly treated. Sega also appeared to understand the need to make structural changes in our society, as well as her hope for these Latino children to fight for reforms.

Other participants discovered structural inequalities through the service-learning project. Fisher, a White participant from another area of the country, was appalled that the water from the kitchen sink inside of the center wasn’t potable. We had to go bring in 5-gallon water containers from outside of the neighborhood to even make Kool-Aid for part of our snack after gardening. Fisher, a math major, wrote:

One thing that really bothers me though is the lack of clean drinking water. The probable reason for this is substandard piping that was put down in the very beginning. The reason for this deduction is the new construction of the gated communities going up around them. They would never stand still for bad water from [name of city], so the culprit must be the original piping of the colonias.

Social justice also related to the anger my students expressed when their tutees told them about the social inequalities they experienced at school. My students discussed in class and wrote in their reflections that some teachers either ignored the colonia children or were mean to them after discovering where they lived. Reeva, a math major, wrote, “The teachers of some of the kids at the program alienate them just because of the place they reside in. We teachers are not supposed to be biased, but based on the stories my students have told me, only the “rich” kids get the attention and get to do the ‘cool’ stuff.”

Other participants were dismayed to discover the level of poverty in America. Lanie, an English major, was greatly affected by why she witnessed when she took a tutee home. A sudden, short rain had engulfed the living room of his tiny home. She wrote: “It made me wonder how a neighborhood in the United States could be so poor if supposedly the United States is so rich. People should not have to live in these kinds of situations.” Similarly, Bev, a science major, wrote about her shock in seeing her tutee’s home:

On Friday, I got to go with [director's name] to pick up Garfield. He lives just down the block from the tutoring center. When we pulled up into his driveway, I could not believe my eyes. I already knew that the tutee our class is working with are living in poverty, but I did not imagine that it could be this bad. His house was literally a small shack attached to an old, beat-up mobile home. In my head I was thinking, "My God, this can't be where he actually lives ...

The houses participants saw were not anomalies. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (No Date, p. 5):

Housing in the colonias is primarily constructed by residents little by little, using available materials. Professional builders are rarely used. Residents frequently start with tents or makeshift structures of wood, cardboard, or other materials, and, as their financial situation allows, continue to improve their homes.

Students’ newfound awareness of the social inequalities around them is evident in the statement of Janie, an English major: “Because of the project, I learned about a neighborhood I never knew existed. I was oblivious to the poverty in [name of city].” Participants’ critique of poverty and structural inequalities was significant because this critique did not appear to be the norm in other studies. In fact, Boyle-Baise lamented that her pre-service teacher participants did not question the poverty they saw during their SL experiences: “A significant ‘non-finding’ was the lack of a critical stance toward inequality (1998, p. 53). Boyle-Baise held her multicultural education classes at the university and had her students serve at various community centers.

However, having our class at the center where my students tutored the children and gardened with them helped them to feel more of a part of the community. Since we practically “camped-out” at the center from 3:30 to 9 p.m., participants in some way lived the children’s experiences. Also, because they not only tutored the children, but gardened with them, they may have been able to associate poverty with children they came to love. Thus, the children were no longer “the other,” but the loved.

My students’ awareness and anger about local poverty and inequality appeared to motivate them to help their communities by engaging in future SL projects. For example, Abey, an English major, wrote, “This motivated me to invest in my community and take part in other service-learning projects.” Another math major, Reeva, wrote: “service-learning is a great opportunity to give back to society and to make a difference in the lives of others.” Almost all participants mentioned that they could engage their students in SL by having their future students tutor children in and outside of school settings. Olivia, a math major, wrote: “I can have my high school students to come to the tutorial center to tutor elementary students, especially in math.”

It is important to point out that few participants had any experience in SL before this project. On their pre-reflections, a few wrote that they participated in a Reach-Out-And-Read project in which they read to young children in pediatric offices a few times for another professor’s course. One other student, the only science major in the study, wrote that she had participated in beach clean-ups. Besides these three students, no others participated in any type of SL in college, high school, middle school, or elementary school. Thus, for them to want to have their future students to participate in SL in specific ways speaks volumes to the impact the project had on them.

3. Bias Reduction

The third theme relates to how my students’ biases changed toward the neighborhood and its inhabitants. They realized it wasn’t as dangerous as others said and that nothing bad would happen to them if they helped at the center. Yet they not only lost their fear. They also realized that the people living there were not so different from them and that the people there had the same dreams, the same rights. Fisher, the same math major who critiqued the inequalities of water between the colonia and surrounding gated communities, wrote: All though [sic] it can be a little scary on the first pass through, for the most part is made up of people who are trying to survive and build a future for their families.” Another math major, Olivia, wrote, “It’s not as dangerous as some people say. Students that live in this neighborhood are as any other child in [name of city]. They have the same dreams, same right to be educated.”

As I reflected on how afraid my students appeared when they first started at the center, I wondered what they knew about the neighborhood before our project. Perhaps what they heard were myths designed to keep the neighborhood functioning as “the other.” Perhaps this is why most participants never volunteered there, never even drove through there before discovering our entire class would be housed in the colonia. It was as if the designation of “other” caused them to feel that the neighborhood was not really part of the city, not really part of their “problem.” It is important to point out again that this is the way the city has treated the neighborhood by not incorporating it.

Besides changing their biases about the neighborhood, participants also altered their attitudes about their tutees' capabilities. Many wrote about how surprised they were at their tutees' skills in math, spelling, and reading. Although my students recognized their tutees' socio-economic obstacles, the children's positive attitudes and skills changed their expectations. For example, Ana, an English teacher, found that her two tutees didn't own a single book, but "there is that hunger for education ... What boggles my mind is how they can become so literate if we know they are not reading at home. Just as they have managed to become successful, other students of similar circumstances can achieve that and more."

4. Hope

The tutees' hunger for knowledge inspired my students to challenge them more because they recognized the hope in the bright, eager eyes of these children. Indeed, hope was the fourth theme, defined as an optimistic outlook for the future of the children and those in similar situations. Hope can be summarized by Sherry, a math major: "service-learning is so rewarding because you are not only teaching and learning from them, but it is so indescribable to see their little faces light up like a shining sun and thank you with all their heart that you made a difference in their lives." Hope appears to be a theme as well in reconstructivist theory. For example, in his graduation address at Memorial University, Giroux (2005, p. 216) said, "Vibrant democratic cultures and societies refuse to live in an era that forecloses on hope. Such societies embrace hope not as some utopian dream or privatized fantasy, but in a way of anticipating a better world in the future ..."

Perhaps the desire to make the world better by critiquing and fighting against social inequalities propelled Freire (1998) to write *Pedagogy of Hope* twenty years after *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire wrote, "To attempt to do without hope, which is based on the need for truth as an ethical quality of the struggle, is tantamount to denying that struggle one of its mainstays" (1998, p. 8). In other words, practice, hope, and struggle are interrelated. Action in times of struggle impacts hope.

5. Impact on Teaching

The fifth theme related to the impact the project had on these pre-service teachers. Many realized the importance of one-on-one contact, basing instruction on students' interests, strengths, and needs, as well as strategies and theories to support culturally diverse English language learners (ELL). English major Abey tied these ELL techniques and concepts to the gardening project: "Gardening presents great opportunities for comprehensible input through realia and gestures. If I use more gestures in speaking in English, I will provide context-embedded learning." Bev, a science major, wrote about the importance of honoring a child's first language and also using it as a tool for second language literacy: "I have learned that it is important to build off a student's first language and that it is important that a child never forgets his or her first language. It also what makes them who they are. Many of the students that were a part of [center] are ELLs."

Additionally, Sega, a math major, wrote that rapport building and student motivation can result when a teacher speaks the same language as her students: "I believe that children can be motivated to learn and study if we interact with them using their native language. Many of the

tutees such as Spiderman do not speak any English. I spoke to them in Spanish and I got the impression that I was liked by them.”

Others, like Janie, an English teacher, wrote about the need to have high expectations of all learners: “They all want to be challenged beyond what they are capable of doing. I can relate this information to Ruby Payne, Lisa Delpit, and Luis Moll who all believe we should have high expectations for our students, no matter what background they have.”

6. Joy

The sixth theme was joy, defined as pleasure, fun, delight, happiness, and personal satisfaction. Although all wrote that they got a great deal out of the project, some wrote about the fun they had during the tutoring, while others wrote about the enjoyment they had from gardening. Bev, a science major, wrote: “We planted several chile pequin [native chile pepper] bushes in the vegetable patch. I had so much fun doing the gardening project. I am definitely someone that doesn't mind to get dirty.” Others discussed how joyful the project had been for them. Janie, an English major, sums up so eloquently how personally fulfilling the project was for her: “My tutee helped me to realize that I have a bigger heart than I thought.” In another entry, Janie wrote: “I felt overcome with joy because we were doing something for a good cause. It was uplifting to know I am important in making our kids' neighborhood a better and safer place for them.”

Implications

What my students learned from the integration of course content with tutoring and gardening was more than I had expected. Because they were working alongside their tutees inside the center and outside in the garden, their relationships became deeper and more multi-faceted. They dug together, composted together, planted together, mulched together, and watered plants together, which broke down barriers and transformed mere tutee/tutor relationships. For instance, Lanie, an English major, wrote: “I also liked this garden project because it gives me an opportunity to get to know my tutees better. I think that it has brought me closer to my tutees.” Olivia, a math major, also wrote: “Those students must see their teachers as human beings, sweating, working, smiling, and having fun.” When the tutees worked informally with my university students to create a unified product, they saw they could be themselves and could have fun with these role models. This lowered the children's affective filters so more learning could take place during the tutoring sessions. As an illustration of this, the priest from the center came by one day as we were all working outside. He told me that it was wonderful for the children to experience teachers outside of the classroom gardening with them.

Next, the design of this SL experience was consistent with the research findings of others. Rowls and Swick (2000) and Parker-Gwin and Mabry (1998) found that extensive course integration of SL and students' reflections of the service were important elements in making SL meaningful. Fisher, a math major, wrote about the importance reflections played in the SL project: “The reflections are a good way to slow down to check up on what you are doing. This is an activity that I will have to continue in the future. It is also something that I will need to get my students to do.”

Moreover, participants wrote in their reflections and told me during class discussions that they valued SL over field-based classes in the public schools. For a field-based class, pre-service teachers observe for 20 hours and teach two short lessons, evaluated by the mentor teacher and the college professor. As one participant said, “This is so much more beneficial than field-basing because sometimes the teachers don’t even want us there and won’t let us help much. Here, we have to do everything as teachers – discipline, lesson planning, tutoring.” My finding is also supported by the changes I observed in Segá, a math major who was in another course of mine the previous semester. In the previous course, she did not demonstrate much effort or enthusiasm in her field-based project. She also started later than all other students and switched schools. However, she blossomed during the SL class. I was surprised by how many connections she made in her written reflections of the SL project. My discovery is also supported by Boyle-Baise (1998), who wrote that SL exposed her pre-service teachers to intercultural experiences that they may not have had in the schools. She stated,

Placing pre-service teachers in schools serving culturally mixed or low-income populations has been used to provide experience with diverse youth and exemplify responsive teaching. This practice has limitations because teachers with whom prospective teachers are placed may not be in touch with local communities or may not teach in culturally sensitive ways (p.52).

Boyle-Baise’s discussion of teachers who do not practice culturally sensitive pedagogy matched my participants’ reflections about how mean many local teachers were to the children when they discovered they came from the community. Thus, the SL project impacted participants’ understanding of social justice issues.

Yet how did this SL project impact the community? This research and class began in May 2006, but I’ve been sending students from my courses to the site for SL tutoring projects since 2003. May 2007 was my second year of research, teaching, and SL at the after-school tutoring center and this May 2008 will constitute my third year. In other articles, I will write about the future May classes at the center. For May 2008, I am including the children, parents, and other community members in the research to discover how the community benefits from this project. As of today’s date, the benefits to the community are based solely on my conversations and observations with those involved and are hence anecdotal. Expanding my participant base to include not just my students, but others in the neighborhood, will demonstrate the importance of these SL projects in communities.

Caveats aside, this SL project and other community service projects by others in the neighborhood may have helped the collective self-esteem of the neighborhood (Steinem, 1993). Even though the city neglects it, my students and volunteers from other agencies have shown their love and concern for it and its residents. As a result of our gardening and tutoring project, people in the neighborhood saw the university investing in the children by providing free tutors. They saw the university students and a nutty professor with the children four days a week in the hot May heat; it starts to hit 95 degrees in this border town in April.

The residents also witnessed the university investing in the neighborhood through the native trees, flowers, and bushes that we planted. Also, the community benefited ecologically because the native flora we planted attracted native birds, butterflies, and bees. As Sega, a math major, wrote: “The garden helped because the children learned about plants and how they beautify our communities. Spiderman helped a lot in the project. He is looking forward to seeing the garden in full bloom.”

Lessons Learned

For those interested in starting SL, or for those who engage their students in these types of experiences, I have learned much. First, it is important to continue a relationship with the provider and to continue the SL for many years at the same site to impact the community in the long-term. In their study of 260 college students participating in courses involving service-learning, Parker-Gwin and Mabry (1998) highlighted the importance of long-lasting, meaningful partnerships between community organizations and faculty members. As a social activist and researcher, I am interested in maintaining a relationship with the after-school tutoring center in the neighborhood. For example, I communicate with the director of the center on a regular basis, have my students tutor there throughout the year, and assist her with projects. In March 2008, the project director, children, my students, and I participated in “The Big Read” through a grant my university received from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Second, I learned that an instructor’s presence during the service-learning demonstrates to students her/his passion, which motivates students to take the project seriously. My presence showed my student that the tutoring and gardening were worth my time and effort. Every fall, I have students volunteer at the same center and the reflection questions students answer for the SL project are identical to those during the May class. However, during the fall and spring, I cannot do the garden and cannot be at the center because of my schedule. The differences between my students’ reflections for the May gardening class my fall class sans gardening and sans the on-site class are amazing. When they go on their own time, their reflections are not as deep or heart-felt. Also, it is important to mention that in a community college or university setting, the passionate professor may be the only SL continuity from year to year with the site. Even though our university has an active Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) and an active staff, the CCE cannot start SL projects on its own. Each university and community college needs more professors who not only engage their students in SL, but who make a long-term commitment to a particular site.

Third, creating a common class product based on the service was also a motivating factor, which relates to the social aspect and classroom community that Dewey (1938) said were integral in learning. Working together to create a community vegetable garden and a butterfly garden was a united process and product. Group projects between college students, instructors, and community members could include painting a mural, performing a play or music concert, or remodeling a community center.

In conclusion, participants’ written reflections convinced me that SL can help pre-service teachers, if the SL learning links student reflections to course content, if the professor establishes a long-term relationship with the community, and if students and community members come

together to create a lasting product. The particular combination of one-on-one tutoring, native plant gardening, and holding the class at the center spread care, social justice, anti-bias, hope, and joy, and it also impacted these future teachers.

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About the Author

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Bussert-Webb has been involved in service learning since 2003 and is fortunate to combine her spiritual beliefs with service, scholarship, and teaching. She has been teaching May session classes at the research site for three years and plans to continue with this SL and gardening project for several years. For May 2008, the third year at the site, parents, children, and other

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