

Realizing Language Equity through Service Learning

Aileen Hale, Assistant Professor Bilingual Education, and Erin Whittig, Adjunct Professor English Department, Boise State University, Idaho

Abstract

This paper focuses on the interaction of service learning & social justice in the form of a case study. The case study is based on one student's experience with injustice, based on his lack of dominant language skills. Through a university service learning English 101 experience, he becomes an advocate for the need to address similar language equity injustices with local refugees. This case study reveals the actualized potential of service learning pedagogy to enable a student's movement from charity toward social justice and advocacy.

Introduction

The intersection of service learning and social justice can be witnessed within both pedagogical strategies and philosophical orientations. Service learning, when carried through its full cycle of engaged community service, critical reflection and analysis, and concrete action, addresses the root causes of societal injustices (Kolb, 1984), and aims to create a more just society. While this aim is not always realized, focusing on service that is charity-oriented can still "teach students how to be responsible, how to provide services to the community, how to care for people, and how to address their symptoms of need" (Maybach, 1996, p. 225). However, when service learning is more closely associated with charity, the learning that takes place often focuses more on the intellectual and personal growth of the students. On the other hand, a pedagogical emphasis on social justice directs students to think about the tangible influences they can have in partnership with the communities they serve.

[The pedagogical] goals for a social justice model of service-learning would stress how to responsibly investigate what the individuals in a community define their needs to be, how to be involved in service in a mutually empowering relationship with a diverse group of people, how to care with and about people, and how to address the root causes, as well as the symptoms of need (Maybach, 1996, p. 225).

When a critical orientation to the status quo and possibilities for social change are incorporated into service learning experiences, students' ability to move along the spectrum from charity to social justice is greatly enhanced. Maybach certainly encourages this kind of movement; however, through deeper reflection on this case study, we believe that this conceptual model can be further developed, with conscious methodological application.

If we consider the concept of service on a spectrum from charity to social justice, service learning has traditionally been more closely associated with the charity end. However, there is a growing movement encouraging students to move toward the social justice end of the spectrum (Rosenberger 2000). To first concretize these terms, we use

charity referring to the provision of help or relief to those in need, where “decisions about service and control of service remain with the provider” (Deans, 2000, p. 257). It consists of an individual or group acting voluntarily to offer resources (money, food, shelter, knowledge, labor, time, etc.) to those with fewer resources or in need. Social justice, on the other hand, refers to the intent of altering structural or institutional inequalities which treat people unfairly, in an effort “to solve our social problems rather than ameliorate their negative consequences” (Marullo & Edwards, 2000, p. 899). The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all individuals and groups in a democratic society, such that participants develop a sense of personal agency and social responsibility (Bell, 1997; Warren, 1998).

In our case study, we show how one student progresses along the spectrum from charity to social justice. A retrospective analysis of one Burmese refugee student’s experience revealed key components of his journey which enabled his movement toward greater social action. Although the service learning component within Tin’s English composition courses was not pedagogically designed toward social justice, an analysis of Tin’s case study showed us how, as instructors, we could more actively facilitate a student’s progression from charity and acknowledgment of an issue to advocacy and social action (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). When pedagogically pursued, a “do good” sense of responsiveness to immediate needs can be replaced by an analysis of power and oppression in the service learning course and field experience (Wade, Boyle-Baise, & O’Grady, 2001).

The examination of social justice within the context of service learning courses necessitates the consideration of issues of power (Warren, 1998). When researching the literature, we noticed many of the issues of power focused on class, gender, race, and socio-economic issues; what we found less prevalent was the issue of language equity. Tin’s case study delves into the relationship of language and power, and reinforces the notion that, in order for all members in a society to achieve full and equal participation, access to the dominant language is essential. One’s ability to have a voice in a democratic society, as well as participate with equal economic access (McCarthy and Whitlock, 2002) is strongly impacted by his/her access to learning the dominant language (Janks, 2000; Freire, 1970).

Through his personal experience with language inequity in Thailand (his country of first asylum after leaving Burma/Myanmar), Tin first developed sensitivity to language injustice. Tin’s analysis of language equity as an element of injustice moved him along the spectrum from an *awareness* of language equity issues to an *ability to act* on those issues. He became aware of language as something that can be “used to put people in their place” (Morgan, 1998) and then used this awareness to motivate himself to learn English, knowing he would soon resettle in the United States. He subsequently developed enough proficiency in the dominant language (in this case, English) to advocate for those who had yet to discover their voice in this society.

Tin’s movement from *charity* to *social justice* is evidenced through his intent to facilitate the empowerment of those who have traditionally been disempowered—English language learners (ELLs). He took it upon himself to interview Burmese refugees in

their native language, intending that his research be used in the application for a grant to make English as a Second Language (ESL) classes more accessible to refugees.

Case Study: Tin

I had never thought I would be one of the victims, who suffered so much for I did not speak Thai or any languages other than my native Burmese. I had absolutely no idea one day I would have to escape my own country and become a refugee in a foreign country. Without having a choice, I had to work on a Thai fishing boat in order to survive in a Thai-Burma border town, Ranong. That was my first challenge out in the sea rather than being in a classroom with books and pencils at school.

When my boat arrived at the shore after fishing in the sea for a month, the captain of my boat handed over money to the lead, who then paid my coworkers one by one—all, except me. It took me a while to realize that I was cheated by the lead. Noticing my hopeless and disappointed face, the captain asked me in Thai what had happened to me. I did not speak any Thai and had no idea what he was talking about. Eventually, I could only guess what he was saying to me by his face and body language. He, similarly, did not understand what I was saying in my broken English either. I did not speak their language and could not communicate with someone who wanted to help me. In the end I did not get what I deserved for my hard work. That was the biggest price I had ever paid for not being able to speak a language. I regretted those unfortunate events as I would not have been cheated if I could have spoken Thai. That was the reason that motivated me to learn Thai.

Knowing how I could be facing trouble communicating with other people for not being able to speak a foreign language, I started taking English classes two years before my departure to the United States for resettlement at the end of 1999. As soon as I arrived in Boise, I went to the Refugee Center to learn English as well as the culture and traditions of the community.

Tin had been resettled in Boise for five years before he enrolled in the university ESL-designated English 101 course. Prior to this course, he had overcome some of the challenges of resettlement, having secured a job, an apartment, and a car. He had studied for and passed the tests to obtain his GED (all in English), and had taken a series of university ESL-only writing classes. This “ESL progression” is often taken by English language learners (ELLs) before they enroll in English 101, which, at our university had always been a “mainstream” course.

However, during the fall semester of 2004, our university decided to offer an ESL-designated section of English 101, the first-year composition course required for all students. Several composition instructors were already employing service learning in their courses and found it effective not only in achieving writing objectives, but also for adding an element of “reality” to their writing assignments. The “real-world” dimension which service learning can bring to a writing course is especially relevant for ESL

students who need the language for authentic purposes beyond the classroom (Whittig & Hale, 2005); thus, the creation of ESL service learning-101.

For his service component of ESL-101, Tin chose to partner with the English Learning Center (ELC), the agency that had assisted his resettlement from Burma in 1999. Part of Tin's progression from charity to social justice was evidenced through his motivation to work more than the required fifteen hours at the Center. Additionally, when he enrolled in the English 102 service learning course, which introduces students to composition research methods, Tin chose to continue his partnership with the Center. Both service learning classes provided an avenue for Tin to progress toward social action as he gained an acute awareness of other refugees' experiences with language injustices in the United States, similar to his own experience in Thailand. Through this service experience he was motivated to proactively seek greater justice for them through a service learning project.

In English 102, students' service learning experiences culminated in a community-based research project, in which they were asked to use observation, interview, and library research to determine a "research focus," the results of which should ultimately be useful to their community partners. This project resembles the three-step process proposed by Rosenberger (2000), which aims to highlight social justice in service learning:

First, students focus on local concerns that are related to course content. Second, students talk with relevant stakeholders to define the problem and frame the potential action. Third, students engage in problem-posing and consciousness-raising around the social, political, and economic issues involved in the case. The process of raising one's consciousness and entertaining alternatives is seen as a prelude to activism (in Boyle-Baise and Langford, 2004, p. 56).

Tin essentially followed Rosenberger's process with his own project in English 102, which was quite different from his first service learning project in ESL-101 in which students were asked to produce a useful document for their community partners (i.e., a brochure, website, newsletter, press release, or pamphlet). After assessing the needs of the English Learning Center in ESL-101, Tin discovered an "immediate need" to help organize a diaper drive for the children of immigrants served by the Center. He designed an advertisement soliciting donations from local businesses. Securing resources for those in need, although necessary, certainly falls within the realm of charity. In contrast, Tin's critical inquiry in English 102 into issues of language equity for Boise refugees moved him from providing service as charity to becoming an advocate for change.

After noticing new faces every time I went to the ELC (as a service learning student), I asked the director of the ELC the reason for the inconsistency of refugees coming to learn English. He explained that work schedules and transportation make it difficult to come to the Center. Their work schedules coincide with lessons time. The majority of refugees live very far from the Center and they also do not have either a car or enough English skills to obtain a driver's license. [The director] told me it

would be enormously helpful for those working refugees if the ELC could deliver an English class close to their residence, which teaches at times they do not have to go to work.

As a person who has experienced hardships of not being able to speak a foreign language, I am very interested in our conversation and want to fulfill those people's desires to learn English. I asked [the director] what I could do to help it happen. He told me that we need to do some research to find out where most refugees reside, what time is convenient for them and how many of them will show up to class. Based on our research results, we could write a proposal to get funding from the government or other organizations. He suggested I do research on Burmese refugees since I speak the language.

Being in the unique position of not only understanding the hardships of refugees, but also being able to speak their native language, enabled Tin to acquire the “emic (insider) perspective” (Spradley, 1979) through interviews with Burmese refugees. To gather the same quality of information, an outsider would have not only needed a translator, but also someone who had gone through a similar experience of fleeing to another country and struggling through the language barriers of resettlement.

Through the interviews, Tin gathered greater insight into the high turn-over of students he noticed while serving at the Center. A synthesis of refugee interviews revealed significant difficulties with their ability to continue developing English skills, due to a lack of access to classes, once employed. Refugees described conflicts with work schedules, transportation, and time/location of English classes. Several of Tin's interviewees were working in jobs where they often used their first or second languages (i.e., Burmese or Thai), and thus lacked sufficient opportunities to practice their English. They all expressed satisfaction with the ELC services, as well as an understanding of the urgency to learn English. All of them want to continue studying English, in the hopes of furthering their education or obtaining higher-level employment. For example, one interviewee mentioned a local company that has hired other refugees who “speak better English.” One couple was concerned with finding a translator to go with them to the hospital when they deliver their first baby. The issue of access to translators was echoed by other interviewees, who were dissatisfied with having to rely on translators, and also doubted whether they were accurate and precise. Another told Tin that he had the feeling of “becoming deaf and blind in the United States,” to which Tin responds:

I sincerely understand the feelings, frustration and difficulties they have to deal with in everyday life as they do not understand English, since I had my own difficulties in the past. My sympathy goes for all of them. I really want to see the Center be granted the necessary funding to teach English to those people near where they live at their convenient time.

Through his “responsible investigation” (Maybach, 1996, p. 225) of local refugees' linguistic needs, Tin gained a heightened awareness of language injustice in the lives of his interviewees, and was compelled to help rectify the injustice by offering his

research results to the English Learning Center.

Conclusions

Through the process of critically analyzing this single student's experience we were reminded of the value of case study; that is, to allow us as instructors to reflect on our practices for the purpose of instructional improvement, as well as reflect on student practices for the purpose of informed guidance. Although we cannot absolutely conclude that Tin's movement from charity to social action was assured by the service learning courses, and therefore presume that every future student will experience the same outcome, we can conclude that there are ways educators can more actively influence this process in the future, namely:

1. *Encourage students to choose service sites with personal significance to their lives.*

In studying Tin's experience and writing this case study, we found that he used his prior knowledge and skills (Vygotsky, 1986) to engage at a deeper level in society and contribute more meaningful service. Tin's ability to connect with community members, also refugees, resulted in a greater depth of knowledge and empathy (Warren, 1998). This connection subsequently gave Tin greater intrinsic motivation to truly want to make a difference for community members who were experiencing injustices similar to his own.

As a result of this study, we have determined the importance of encouraging our students to "mine their histories"—examine issues important to their own identities—as a means of deciding on their service projects. We believe the personal relevancy of the service can positively influence students' ability to move from a charity-oriented service to a social justice orientation.

2. *Pro-actively guide students to follow Rosenberger's steps, in order to consider service beyond charity.*

Witnessing Tin's movement along the service spectrum gave us a heightened consciousness of the role we, as educators, can play in this movement. One option is for educators to allow students to engage in service at the level he/she naturally migrates toward. Another option is for educators to assess where students begin on the spectrum and consciously encourage their movement through guiding their reflection process. The instructor has the ability, and some would argue the obligation, to encourage students to "dig deeper" as they critically reflect on the root causes of, and potential actions to alleviate social injustices.

3. *Facilitate a two-semester sequence of service learning courses.*

The movement from charity to social action doesn't happen overnight. As educators, we need to allow adequate time for a student to make this move, both cognitively and emotionally. As such, we need to recognize the limitations of time in expecting students to make this move within a one-semester timeframe. If we can structure a sequence of 101-102 service learning courses, it could greatly enhance the ability of students to examine their service in greater depth and breadth—ultimately

leading to a focus on social action.

Future Directions for Development: Service Learning in ESL

A recurring issue raised by this retrospective analysis is the involvement of ESL students in service learning courses. Reviewing service learning literature, we found little discussion of service learning in ESL contexts, in which the language learners were discussed as service providers (Heuser, 1999; Elwell, 2001; Grassi, Hanley, and Liston, 2004). Those who have examined service learning's effects on ESL students suggest that it not only provides an "authentic context" (Heuser, 1999, p. 57) for language learning, but can also lead students to "see themselves as valuable, contributing members of society who, even as mere students with less than fluent English skills, could make tangible, much-needed contributions to society" (Elwell, 2001, p. 6). Tin expresses such a sentiment in his project conclusion:

I learned how I can be helpful for people who are in need and decided that whenever I have time I will put my effort to help the dream of wonderful people who want to help others and those disadvantaged people get better lives.

In two semesters of service learning, Tin shifted from client to volunteer, served to server. Maybach (1996) writes that this kind of role shift takes place when "those who traditionally receive service are engaged in projects where they do the serving" (p. 228). This service model then "reflects the need to allow individuals the opportunity to exercise their strengths, and not just to be identified by the weaknesses so often alluded to by society's interpretation of these groups' needs" (p. 228). In a service learning context, English language learners are often assumed to be the ones needing service, rather than the ones able to provide service to others. In realizing a new role as a service learning student, Tin gained a partial new social identity and subsequently tried out his new role with recently-resettled refugees. Through the service project he began to believe in his ability to shape events in others' lives, thus increasing his understanding of his own personal strengths and potential – capable of initiating change within himself and for others.

Maybach argues that attention to service relationship roles "addresses the potential for empowerment in the role previously reserved for the service recipient" (p. 232). Steve Rainey, the director at the English Language Center, pinpoints what that empowerment might mean for a refugee:

[It's] going from total reliance on everyone else to being an independent person, to being able to navigate the society for yourself and to choose among the opportunities . . . instead of having to rely on everyone else to make all of your decisions for you.

When educators actively facilitate service opportunities for populations such as refugees, we can aid their movement toward independence and autonomy, which Rainey notes is part of "the ongoing healing process" a refugee must undergo. Additionally, given the opportunity to serve, Tin chose to give back to the group with which he identified, a choice that complicated and blurred the traditional, hierarchical model of

service.

Many English language learners have stories like Tin's, and we believe that service learning can serve as a vehicle by which they become aware of language equity issues and practice or apply their own prior knowledge for advocacy or consciousness-raising efforts. Smoke (1998) argues that this awareness is crucial for English language learners "because we are facing serious problems over the contraction of resources in our ESL programs" (p. 96; see also Blumenthal, 2002; Manzo, 2005; Smith-Davis, 2004). Not only do students need to become aware of the injustices within the system, but also must "be prepared to work together" (Smoke, 1998, p. 96) to advocate for their rights, which can seriously impact their future opportunities in this country.

In Tin's case, he gained political literacy (Smoke, 1998) as well as linguistic literacy in discovering, through the process of serving, who had control of when and where ESL classes were offered for refugees and immigrants. He became critically aware of issues relating to human difference, social justice, and the educational opportunities that should exist in a society. Tin experienced the opportunity to practice social justice rather than just discuss it as he interviewed refugees with the intent of improving their lives. His case study brings us one step closer to a service ethic of justice that redefines what is needed by marginalized individuals, such as second language learners, in any society: opportunities to serve, not just to be served.

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About the Authors:

Aileen Hale is an Assistant Professor of Bilingual Education at Boise State University. She assisted with data analysis and synthesis for this article. She has extensive experience teaching and researching ESL and service learning theory and pedagogy. She has received several grants for the integration of service learning in higher education and K-12 schools. Her most notable publication is "Service-Learning and Spanish: A Missing Link" in AAHE's series on service learning in the disciplines. You can reach Dr. Hale at Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1725, Tel: 208-426-1136, Fax: 208-426-4006; email aileenhale@boisestate.edu

Erin Whittig is an adjunct professor of English at Boise State University. She was the primary researcher as the instructor for ESL-101. In addition to ESL-101 and mainstream 101 courses, Erin employs service learning in the second-semester composition course at BSU, which introduces students to community-based research. You can reach Dr. Whittig at erinwhittig@boisestate.edu