DIY Service-Learning in ELT
by *Amy Pascucci*

When I first decided to pitch the idea of a service-learning program to my administration, I realized I had more questions than answers. Most of those questions were not related to the ideas, content, or purpose of the program; I was resolute in my belief of the power of service-learning for my English language learners. Instead, most of my questions started with, "How the heck do I…?" and so the following is a brief overview of my process with basic recommendations to get you started on your own service-learning journey.

Service-learning is not new, but it may be a new term for some. For the purposes of this article, we will use the definition provided by the National Youth Leadership Council (n.d.): "Service-learning is an approach to teaching and learning in which students use academic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs." As one might imagine, service-learning in TESOL can take many forms.

Step 1: Research

Thankfully, service-learning in TESOL has an established and helpful body of scholarship to guide those of us interested in developing such a project, course, or program.

Recommendations

1. *Determine project parameters*. Determine the parameters of your project and focus your research according to teaching context, student learning outcomes, student goals, and student strengths.
2. *Keep track of your research*. Produce an annotated bibliography of your research to share with stakeholders.
3. *Gather your own data*. Hold focus groups or survey students regarding some of your initial ideas or proposal. This step can also help set the project parameters or help you revise or refocus your parameters.
4. *Investigate your community*. Search for and reflect on the needs of the community. Identify which needs are being addressed by prospective community partners and which might be of most interest to your students.

Step 2: Stakeholder Buy-in

My students and I talk a lot about stakeholders throughout the course. It's important to be transparent about who and what is invested in their work. The main stakeholders will include the school/program, the teacher, the students, and the community partner(s). Each stakeholder will be invested in different ways, and you should therefore tailor your approach when cultivating buy-in.

Recommendations

1. *Create a proposal*. Create a proposal for your school administration that describes all aspects of the project. Include your annotated bibliography. Try to anticipate questions that your administrators will have, such as insurance ramifications and compensation for your time coordinating such a project.
2. *Create a teacher handbook*. Develop a teacher handbook that states all of the responsibilities of the instructor and a timeline for the course and volunteering. I include everything, including the application process, important deadlines, examples of communication with different stakeholders, and spreadsheet templates.
3. *Create a communication template*. Write a form email or initial communication for potential community partners that describes service-learning, your institution, expectations you have for the partners, and the benefits mutually bestowed on the students and the organization.
4. *Remove barriers when possible*. If a community partner requires a lot of paperwork or has a rigorous screening process, talk to them about ways to make it easier to participate. For example, maybe you can fill out one set of paperwork for the whole group. If your school has an application process, work to make the forms easy to find and easy to complete. Depending on your location, make sure transportation is accessible. My students are responsible for their own transportation to and from volunteering, so I always make sure we talk about what that looks like, how to estimate cost, and travel time.

Step 3: Framework

There are so many variables within one project, course, or program that it is nearly impossible to replicate students' learning in the same exact way each time. However, a general framework within which to work is absolutely essential.

Recommendations

1. *Planning*. Determine student learning outcomes. Consider the skills and knowledge needed to reach the outcomes. Decide how students are going to be assessed.
2. *Curriculum*. In my case, the content is affected by the community partners. My learning outcomes focus on language, but the medium through which students achieve those outcomes is the content of the curriculum. Consider topics that might help students in their future endeavors, like intercultural communication, leadership, mindfulness, or problem-solving.

3. *Communication*. Be transparent about communication channels and which stakeholder is responsible for which communication. I ask community partners to copy me on any email communication to students, so I can ensure things run smoothly by providing language assistance and preventing cross-cultural misunderstandings.
4. *Documentation*. Document procedures for the teacher and administration. Encourage students to document their experience. My students upload photos and videos to a shared Google folder in addition to journaling and blog writing.

Step 4: Evaluation

You've most likely already thought about this as it is related to each of the previous steps. When doing your research, you will come across ways others have evaluated their service-learning projects. Evaluation happens with different stakeholders at different times with different purposes.

Recommendations

1. *Develop appropriate assessments*. The assessments should match the language outcomes of your project. For example, if your class is focusing on spoken fluency, then the assessments should focus on spoken fluency.
2. *Create opportunities for feedback from the community partners*. I like to talk either on the phone or face-to-face at the beginning, middle, and end of the term. Sometimes I join students and volunteer alongside them.
3. *Guide the reflective process*. I prompt students to write about specific topics based on where we are in the term, and then at certain points I have them go back and review previous journal entries to give them a chance to reflect on the process itself.
4. *Build in a 360-degree evaluation*. Students should be able to provide feedback on the school, the teacher, the curriculum, and the community partner. I usually do this through a journal reflection, anonymous survey, and small group meetings outside of class.

Step 5: Revision

I would argue that your own reflective process is crucial to the success of your project. Each time I run my class, I make changes based on what students and community partners have told me about their experience. Some of those changes include my procedures for communication, changing community partners based on compatibility, and curriculum. I have now had several students take my course a second time and am encouraged when they notice that things have improved.

Recommendations

1. *Keep notes*. I write down observations in class, questions students ask, comments about materials we use, feelings I have about what we are doing, and feedback from student meetings.
2. *Set your own goals*. This encourages you to keep growing. One term, I challenged myself to match my students' volunteer hours, another I set out to create an entirely new

curriculum so that students could repeat the class without repeating the same materials, another I wanted to open the class to wider range of proficiency levels, and another I wanted to provide an opportunity for students outside of our class to volunteer. I achieved all of these goals, and in turn revised the course each time.

3. *Maintain the iterative process*. Continue to research, find partners and students (and gain their buy-in as stakeholders), adjust your framework and evaluation process, and then start all over again.

Service-Learning in Action

In my experience, I have strived to have students partner with one organization for the entire term to help them get to know the staff, other volunteers, and learn more deeply about the impact the organization has on the community. With that said, we also do several one-off volunteer events as a class, including a beach clean-up that our class organizes for other students, faculty, and staff to experience volunteering.

The experiences students have outside the class guide our conversations in the classroom and our materials focus on topics like stereotypes, intercultural communication, community revitalization, affecting change and social justice, leadership, and reflection. Because of their experiences, they are able to provide real-life examples on these topics as well as immediately apply what they have discussed in class to their volunteering.

Learning Outcomes

Sometimes our partners and class materials change from term to term, but our learning outcomes remain the same. Our class language objectives include

- reading and listening skills for critical analysis of texts related to our topics and
- oral proficiency and presentation skills to empower students while communicating with organization staff and for presentation assignments for class.

My class is multilevel and so students are assessed with different rubrics based on proficiency level.

Community Partners

Some example community partners include organizations that provide

- educational support for refugee youth,
- assistance for at-risk families,
- STEM education in underserved schools,
- environmental stewardship,
- care for seniors living with memory loss diseases, and
- meal preparation of rescued food.

Students have volunteered with these organizations as tutors, thrift shop associates, teacher assistants, companions, and cooks.

The Legacy Project

In addition to direct volunteer service, students are required to complete a legacy project. These have included

- promotional videos,
- brochures,
- market research,
- educational tools,
- clothing drives, and
- onboarding documents for future service-learning students.

The legacy project gives students an opportunity to work with the organization staff to find a gap that they can fill. They are responsible for the ideation and implementation under the guidance of the organization.

Conclusion

Ultimately, you want to find a network. Find a group of people that has created service-learning projects, courses, and programs; their insights and lessons learned will be invaluable to your process. I found so much inspiration from reading the research, but I was empowered by the group of people that presented at conferences, answered my emails, met for coffee, and connected me to others who had come before. Whenever I asked, "How the heck do I do that?" there was someone with an answer.

Reference

National Youth Leadership Council. (n.d.). What is service-learning? Retrieved from https://nylc.org/service-learning/

Other Resources

Perren, J., & Wurr, A. (Eds.). (2015). *Learning the language of global citizenship Strengthening service-learning in TESOL.* Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing.

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