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“It was Sort of Hard to Understand Them at Times”: Community Perspectives on ELL Students in Service- Learning Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

Scholars are increasingly exploring service-learning as an approach to TESOL pedagogy, but little scholarship exists on the experiences of the *community members* who work with ELL students. This chapter draws on interviews with a high school English teacher and three of her students who were “served” by a mentoring program with a college composition class of international students. Interviewees revealed the complex ways that their service-learning experiences were impacted by the college students’ processes of language and culture acquisition. In particular, the community members offered insights into how traditional service-learning power dynamics between server and served can be disrupted in TESOL collaborations when community partners are more proficient in English than the service-learning students, shifting notions of who the “expert” is in the relationship. The chapter concludes with recommendations for service-learning practitioners and researchers on how to create stronger TESOL service-learning collaborations with community partners, including suggestions for partnership framing, curriculum design, localized formative program assessment, and future research.

Keywords: service-learning, ELL, TESOL, community perspectives, international students, power dynamics

INTRODUCTION

The burgeoning of scholarship on service-learning in ELL classrooms suggests that service-learning provides a range of benefits to English Language Learners. Students are often offered an opportunity to interact with native speakers beyond the classroom and to use language in meaningful, real-world contexts (Minor, 2001; Russell, 2007), and scholars have suggested that service-learning with ELL

students can personalize the texts read in class (Elwell & Bean, 2001); bolster language (Askildson, Kelly & Mick, 2013; Heuser, 1999; Wurr, 2001); increase student participation and engagement (Grassi, Hanley, & Liston, 2004; Heuser, 1999; Russell, 2007); foster self-confidence (Grassi, Hanley, & Liston, 2004; Heuser, 1999; Wurr, 2009); support students in earning better grades (Grassi, Hanley, & Liston, 2004); help students feel connected to their schools and communities (Russell, 2007; Wurr, 2001); heighten their cross-cultural understanding and awareness of U.S. culture (Heuser, 1999; Wurr, 2001, 2009); and deepen knowledge of social issues (Wurr, 2009). However, the question remains—what impact does working with ELL students have on the community?

Scholarship is relatively silent on this question, in part because of the general lack of research into community outcomes and perspectives of service-learning. Stoecker and Tryon stated in their 2009 review of research, “We [the service-learning field] especially don’t know how service-learning affects communities from the perspective of those who live and work there” (p. 7). Little scholarly attention has been paid to perspectives of those who experience service-learning primarily through an affiliation with the community organization rather than with the university. Even as we keep in mind that university and community are not clear dichotomies, attempting to hear community thoughts is critical. Gathering community perspectives involves hearing from people in non-profit staff positions, such as teachers or volunteer coordinators, and also those directly “served” by the partnership, the community members or clients of the organization.

While there are few studies that seek the insight of non-profit staff who collaborate with service-learning students, such as a section of Askildson, Kelly, and Mick’s (2013) study that includes reflections from staff who worked with international students, even less has been published about those who directly receive the service. Martin, SeBlonka, and Tryon (2009) wrote that to their knowledge, “there are no studies of client experiences with short term service learning” (p. 62). With some searching, I unearthed a handful of studies that include the perspectives of community residents rather than non-profit staff or teachers (d’Arlach, Sánchez, and Feuer, 2009; Jorge, 2003; Kssabgy & El-Din, 2013; Skilton-Sylvester & Erwin, 2000), but one of these studies addresses community member perspectives of ELL service-learners as part of the study (Kassabgy & El-Din, 2013). None of these studies are devoted primarily to discussing community member experiences with ELL service-learning.

Research into community experiences of TESOL partnerships in particular is critical, as the dynamics of language and culture acquisition can shape service-

learning in ways that are not foregrounded in studies of mainstream service-learning programs. I first began to recognize the significance of how language differences impact service-learning when I was interviewing thirty-seven community members as part of another study on community perspectives of service-learning. A Latina high school student who had been mentored in her writing by a college student shared with me a story she considered a turning point in the mentorship program. She had been sitting next to her college mentor in a theater waiting for *The Glass Menagerie* to start, because both classes were analyzing the play. The college student turned to her, holding a smart phone, and said, “You speak Spanish, right? Would you mind proofreading this email I’m sending to my Spanish professor?” Up until this point, the high school student had been shy about sharing her writing with the college student and uncomfortable speaking out during class discussions, but she told me that this moment shifted the relationship: moving forward she was much more willing to exchange writing and take risks (J. Abarca, personal interview, May 20, 2014). As the understanding of who was the language “expert” was disrupted, traditional power dynamics in service-learning were disrupted as well.

As post-structural identity theories of second language acquisition have highlighted, “power relations play a crucial role in social interactions between language learners and target language speakers” (Norton Peirce, 1995). Norton Peirce (1995) emphasized that language students—and, I would add, community partners—negotiate a sense of self in a process that must be understood in the context of the inequitable social structures. Language learning is inextricably bound up in complex acts of identity performance and identity constitution, and intimately shaped by power (Pavlenko, 2002). TESOL service-learning, then, needs to be examined with attention to the social as well as the linguistic, tracing the role of social dynamics in community collaborations.

In this chapter, I explore the complex power relationships that emerged in a mentoring partnership between a college composition class comprised of international students and an English class at an underserved high school. Drawing on interviews with three high school students who were “mentored” by ESL college students and their high school English teacher, I demonstrate how traditional notions of server and served can be unsettled in situations that involve ELL service-learning students, and offer suggestions for how teachers and researchers of TESOL in service-learning can best respond to the complex dynamics in ELL partnerships.

STUDY BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This study begins with the epistemological assumption that community partners in service-learning are holders and producers of knowledge, and not passive recipients of service.¹ To honor community knowledges in my study methodology, I combined the method of the personal interview with practices from indigenous methodologies and structures from the service-learning tradition of reflection. Indigenous methodologies strive to make research ethical for a community population historically exploited in research—native peoples—and researchers working in a range of community contexts may be able to foster more responsible research through ideas and practices that arise from this conceptual heritage. Although the three high school students in this particular study self-identified as Latino/a, and I myself am White, I used this framework because I aspire to principles highlighted in indigenous research methodologies, such as the creation of knowledge that is directly useful for research participants, active respect for the culture of research participants, sensitivity toward the ways that research can be exploitative, and the valuing of stories as knowledge. While I was concerned about the ways this move could mirror appropriation, I attempted to employ indigenous methodologies with a spirit of humility in an effort to act more responsibly toward my interview participants. I also sought direction from indigenous research methodologies out of respect for the history of Tucson as a research site: I recognize that this land was previously held by and is still understood by many to belong to the Tohono O’odham nation. In this project, I drew from the indigenous traditions of reciprocity, relationality, orientation toward action, and “conversational storytelling” interviews (Besssarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Kovach, 2010; Smith, 1999; Thomas, 2005).

To provide a structure for turning the stories gathered in these conversational interviews into concepts that can guide future action, I borrowed from service-learning’s theories of reflection, which are built from inquiry into how people learn from experience. Instead of collecting the stories and then conducting the analysis myself as the academic, I involved community members in interpreting and reflecting on their own experiences. The early service-learning group Campus Opportunity for Outreach League (COOL) condensed Kolb’s Experiential

¹ However, honoring community perspectives does not necessitate uncritical acceptance of all community insights. Freire (1970) warns that we must not over-trust the people’s knowledge, as the oppressed “house” the oppressor (p. 169). In other words, community members can sometimes reflect harmful dominant ideologies, such as racism, sexism, and classism, so community knowledge as well as academic knowledge must be considered with critical reflection.

Learning Cycle into an easy-to-remember set of questions to guide reflection: “What? So What? Now What?” (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996), and I borrow this same structure for the core of my interview process. Community partners were asked to identify memorable stories from their service experience, and to describe the story in detail (the “What”). Then, together we reflected on the “So What,” analyzing emotional, political, and cultural dynamics behind the story through questions like “Why did that happen?” and “What role was race playing in that interaction?” Finally, I invited the interviewee to identify implications for future practice, in the “Now What” stage.

I offered research participants an opportunity to be credited for their intellectual contributions to the work. When describing an indigenous interview method, Chilisa (2012) argued that participants should decide if their names can be used in the research, as using names encourages the researcher to remain accountable to the participants and highlights the role of interviewees as knowledge-makers rather than objects. In my study, participants were given the option after the interview of choosing pseudonyms to protect their privacy or using their real names to be publicly acknowledged for their insights. All three students and the high school teacher chose to use their real names, though one high school student chose to be identified by only her first and middle name.

Using the reflective storytelling methodology described above, with IRB approval, I conducted four interviews, each about an hour in length, with three high school students and one high school teacher who had worked with an ESL college class through a program called Wildcat Writers. I compared these interviews with interviews I conducted for another study with twelve high school students who worked with mainstream college classes in the same Wildcat Writers program.

Wildcat Writers is a service-learning initiative hosted by the University of Arizona Writing Program that links high school and college English classes for digital writing exchanges, joint field trips, and collaborative class activities.² Now in its 10th year, Wildcat Writers involves between 600-1200 students each year. As part of its college access vision, Wildcat Writers engages high schools that have student demographics historically underrepresented in higher education. The high school featured in this case study, Desert View, is 83% Latino/a and 74% eligible for free and reduced lunch. As coordinator of Wildcat Writers, I worked

² Other similar programs include the OWL program (Oregon State University Writing Liaison) at Oregon State, the SPURS program (Students Partnered for Undergraduate Rhetorical Success) at UT-Austin, the Bobcat Writers program at Georgia State College and University, and the Iluminación program at Chapman University in California.

extensively with Desert View High School for seven years, and I have continually been impressed by the creativity, warmth, and drive of its students and staff. This is a school that has a standout Mariachi band and Folklorico dance group, and for the past five years, students have hosted an entirely volunteer-run, peer-staffed writing center.

The partnership I analyze in this case study involves a creative writing class at Desert View and a 100-level required composition course for international students at University of Arizona. International students at University of Arizona are mostly Chinese, though there is also a large number of students from Saudi Arabia and Korea. In their Wildcat Writers collaboration, students in this partnership shared “I am From” poems with their partners, the college students wrote analysis papers on poems the high school students were performing, the teachers organized field trips both to the high school and to the college, and students offered feedback on each other’s writing through Google Docs. As Wildcat Writers coordinator, I regularly met with the high school and college instructor as their partnership developed and assisted with logistics for their field trips.

The three high school students I interviewed approached Wildcat Writers from a range of personalities and social locations. All three self-identified as Latino/a, two identified as LGBTQ, and all three were bilingual and/or reported having close family connections with Mexico. It is critical here, as in all second language research, to emphasize the fluid nature of identity (Chuang, 2003; Norton Peirce, 1995). There are no clear boundaries around identity groupings, community partner identities are not stable, and community voice is not monolithic. Even categories such as “international student” and “community partner” can blur; many of the community partner youth who participated in the service-learning program were themselves international, as they were immigrants from Mexico.³ The interviewees featured in this chapter—Teresa, America, Jackey, and Chris— spoke from shifting and complex positionalities,

America Itzama was a senior when she participated in Wildcat Writers, and she described herself as a “girly tomboy.” She has aspirations of becoming a veterinarian, and she has sheep, dogs, fish, a cat, and peacocks. She has held several leadership positions with the Writer’s Club and Science Club. Also a senior, Jackey Torres enjoys writing and reading, and hopes to minor in creative writing when she begins college, majoring in veterinary science. In her words,

³ There is, however, a significant difference between international students who intend to return to their home countries and see their time in the U.S. as instrumental and immigrant students who intend to integrate.

she is “independent” and “open minded.” Chris Demarra was a sophomore during his partnership with the international students, and he is involved in the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam. At the time of his interview, he was considering the field of law. Their teacher, Teresa Driver, was a theater stagehand for twenty years before becoming a teacher, and was in her fourth year teaching at the time of her interview. She is enthusiastic about teaching, and she approaches education with a strong focus on student choice and transparency with her students.

As I met with Teresa, America, Jackey, and Chris over ice cream or dinner, I noticed some striking differences in their descriptions of service-learning compared to the depictions of the twelve other high school participants who worked with mainstream writing classes in Wildcat Writers. Next, I sketch a portrait of the ways that the ELL, international status of the college students impacted this service-learning partnership.

NUANCING THE DYNAMICS

Service-learning is fraught with problematic power dynamics. The concept of service implies that “the served” have deficits that they cannot address themselves, so the “servers” must do so. Davis (2006) elaborated on how this dangerous attitude establishes a hierarchy between students and community members: “Servicing you, I confirm my relative superiority. Being served, you confirm your inferiority” (p. 153). Many in the field of service-learning have sought to counter these hierarchies through practices such as collaborative writing and activities that place community partners in the position of expert (Flower & Heath, 2000). Additionally, the term “service-learning” itself is increasingly being replaced with less-hierarchical terms like “community-based learning,” “community-building,” “engaged pedagogy,” or “public pedagogy” (Bandy, n.d.; Hessler, 2000; Keith, 1998)—a terminology shift TESOL instructors may want to consider. Yet despite important moves such as these, power differentials often mark the relationships between college students and community partners.

These uneven dynamics can be heightened through common service-learning differences in age or education level, two factors present in Wildcat Writers partnerships between college composition students and high school students. The high school students I interviewed who worked with *mainstream* college classes were acutely aware of these differences, and the majority expressed initial nervousness about the program, as they were afraid to share their writing with older and more experienced students, and they were worried they might be seen as less intelligent. However, these traditional power dynamics were not present to the same extent in the descriptions of high school students who worked with

international students. As teacher Teresa Driver explained, reflecting on the ELL status of many of her own students:

I think [working with international students] offered us a lot of opportunities because I know that when I first posed Wildcat Writers to my students, they were really nervous about working with college students. [The high school students felt], “Oh my gosh, they’re so much better than us.” They started from this place of, “I’m not good enough,” especially because I had a mixed class of sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The seniors are interested, the sophomores were terrified that they were college students. [But] when I was able to frame it as, “Look, these people don’t speak English any better than you do,” that was huge for them. For the population I’m dealing with, English isn’t their first language, English isn’t their home language . . . so for them to be in the same position or maybe even more advanced, they weren’t expecting that.

To Teresa, the fact that the college students were English Language Learners had a significant impact on how her high school students approached the partnership. She continued, “So when the high school students were able to be experts, when they were not the ones who were grammatically challenged, when they realized that the best and brightest of other countries sounded like them, I’m going to get a little choked up.... I think the power shift was huge.” Askildson, Cahill Kelly and Mick (2013) explained in their review of TESOL research that sustained interactions outside the classroom with target language speakers who are willing to provide explicit feedback and negotiate meaning can allow language learners to make significant gains, so the high school students had the opportunity to imagine a role for themselves as supporting the language development of college students. Being framed as knowledgeable about the English language helped the high school students avoid the position of passive service recipients.

Teresa’s interpretation of altered power relationships was independently echoed by the high school students, who saw themselves as helping the college students, more than the other way around. High school student America Itzama, for example, described her interaction with a Chinese college student by saying, “It was like volunteer work, but I really like helping people, making them feel more accomplished and better about themselves.” She had been helping her partner address grammar and idiomatic sayings in his papers. Here, the service roles were reversed, as the high school student saw her work with the college student “like volunteer work.” Similarly, high school student Jackey Torres saw

her role as drawing out her college partners who were reticent to speak in English. She offered, “[The college students] were really shy about sharing so we had to get them to share.” High school student Chris Demarra challenged himself to spark his partners’ learning when he found out they disliked writing and reading poems. He told me he remembered thinking, “[Y]ou know what, I’m going to get these guys to like poetry.” In other words, the high school students were taking on the positionality of expert, teacher, and leader with their ELL college partners because of the language differences.

High school sophomore Chris demonstrated his awareness of how power dynamics can be influenced by English Language ability when he suggested that younger high school students like himself be partnered with international students. He explained that while seniors might have been ready to work on equal ground with native-speaking first-year composition students, “I’m pretty sure that if [my partner] was [a native-speaking] student from here in college that I wouldn’t have been in the same level as them, like I would have been far behind of what level they were on.” His suggestion to pair international students with freshmen and sophomore high school students demonstrates how differences in native language can counteract other markers such as age and education level and change perceptions of who has power.

The international college students’ relative unfamiliarity with the U.S. also shaped how the high school students saw their partners. When offering advice to other high school students who might be working with ELL college students, America suggested that the high school students “should be the leaders probably because [the college students] are from another country so they don’t really know what’s going on. And to have lots of patience and to be very professional about it.... Be willing to share and help them.” Chris recognized the loneliness and homesickness that his international partner might have been experiencing, acknowledging that his partner “had to come all the way over here to get an education that [he] wants. I feel sort of sorry for him because he had to move all the way over here.” As Chris reflected on the challenges faced by his partner, he expressed sympathy—a stance more commonly associated with college students in service-learning classes as they reflect on inequality and consider the difficulties community members experience. Traditional dynamics of pity that can emerge between server and served were disrupted, as the community partner felt “sorry” for the service-learner.

Teacher Teresa Driver shared a story of how her students first began to understand the challenges of being an ELL international student. She explained that after the first joint activity, a “bingo” game where students had to find others

who shared their birthday or played the same sport, an international student told her, “I have been here for two months and I have talked to more people today than in that whole time.” She continues, “It was beautiful for me to see that, and a couple of my students overheard it, and they all the sudden were like, ‘Oh yeah, it’s lonely. Oh, that person is a long ways from home.’” Teresa explained that her students started to understand the potential “alienation” the college students were facing as they came to realize “we are at home; they are not.” Notions of authority and privilege in the partnership were reorganized as the high school students considered their partners’ experiences of living in an unfamiliar culture.

The high school students’ recognition of the issues international students may face was particularly significant, Teresa noted, given that many of her high school students were undocumented and/or immigrants themselves. Teresa told the story of one particular student who was undocumented while her younger sister was a legal resident, and suggested that “for her to have that experience of being the one with more ownership, especially growing up with a little sister who had more, it was really powerful for her.” In the political context of English-only movements and the Arizona SB1070 “Papers Please” law that legalized racial profiling, the high school students were able to be, as Teresa explained, “the one who belongs for someone who really is a stranger in a strange land.” Teresa reflected that having the opportunity to be representatives of Tucson may have helped students recognize, “Oh wait, I’m here, and this is my place.” Many of the high school students at Desert View have experienced various forms of social marginalization, involving immigration status, race, language, and socioeconomic level, but the ELL and international status of the college students changed the power dynamics that Desert View students might normally experience.

These shifts in power dynamics leave the field of service-learning with new questions, as pity and notions of helping/volunteerism have been robustly criticized when directed toward community partners (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000), but questions arise about the impact of these attitudes when directed toward international service-learners. In many ways, it is clear that the positionality of “helper” allowed the high school students to empower themselves in the partnership, encouraging them to feel on more equal ground when interacting with college students. Yet at the same time, I wonder about the effect of these dynamics on the college students—what was it like for them to be “helped” by students younger than they? While the impact on college students is beyond the scope of this chapter given my focus on interviewing community partners, several high school students mentioned the reticence of college students to speak or engage during joint activities, reminding me of Norton Peirce’s

(1995) argument that ELL student motivation be understood politically. As Norton Peirce explained, some students may choose not to engage the target language because they feel disempowered in conversation, and Perren's (2008) study on international students volunteering at community agencies also showed that some international students were reticent to speak out of fear of being perceived as unintelligent. It is difficult to know what caused the hesitance of many international students to dialogue with their high school partners, but unanswered questions such as these suggest that caution may be needed when power dynamics are reorganized—if imbalanced power relationships are simply reversed rather than made more equal, a problem persists. Therefore, the shifting dynamics in ELL partnerships require nuanced understandings and close attention by instructors.

In addition, in asserting that language and cultural proficiencies may have impacted power dynamics by privileging the high school students in this partnership, I do not mean to replace a simplistic server-served power dichotomy with a simplified international-resident dichotomy. In other words, I am not suggesting a clear map of power that always privileges the resident community members over the international students. Indeed, power dynamics related to race, language, and culture were affected significantly by additional intersecting identity markers such as gender and sexuality. A conceptual tool that is helpful here is Critical Race theorist Matsuda's (1991) technique of asking "the other question" (p. 1189). This approach to understanding the complexities of power has been used in community settings to train youth about coalition building across difference and critical inquiry into inequality (Licona & Gonzales, 2013), and might therefore be portable to service-learning collaborations. "Asking the other question" involves first identifying one type of power differential, such as racism, in a given context, and then posing additional questions to identify classism, sexism, heterosexism, nationalism, ableism, mentalism, or other factors in the same context. In this chapter, I have identified how language and cultural differences impact power in the Wildcat Writers exchange, but what about gender? Sexuality? Neurodiversity? These dynamics also played a role in the service-learning case study. For example, America shared a story of how her male international student partner made comments about her appearance, suggesting to her multiple times that she was beautiful but should lose weight to become even more beautiful. These remarks felt strange to America, and she notified the instructors, who offered firm guidance to her partner about the boundaries of respectful discourse in the U.S. Here, gender further complicated the power dynamics in the service-learning relationship, as male evaluation of female

appearance resonates with the patriarchal objectification of women. Beyond gender dynamics, neurodiversity also nuanced interactions. Teresa described to me how she and the college instructor intentionally assigned a more flexible international student to work with a high school student who was autistic.

Perhaps one of the most telling examples of the complexity of power dynamics and the potency of the “other question” approach lies in a story about a transgender high school student who participated in the Wildcat Writers exchange. Stories of sexual difference in TESOL service-learning are not frequently told,⁴ but as Nelson (2006) argued, the field of TESOL can benefit from “queer inquiry” into patterns of thinking and teaching. One of the interviewees shared with me a concern about the emotional safety of a high school student in the class who was newly out as transgender, the only openly transgender student in the high school. As the interviewee explained, this student clearly read as male, but chose to wear 1950’s dresses and lipstick. The student was bullied at school, as is common for many queer youth in Tucson and beyond (Watson, Snapp, Russell, & Licona, 2012). The particular classroom community of Creative Writing was the first place at school where the transgender student began to experiment more openly with gender, unzipping the sweatshirt that remained closed the remainder of the school day to reveal female clothing. The interviewee was a strong advocate for LGBTQ issues, and in addition to expressing concerns about bullying at school, the interviewee worried how the transgender student might be treated in the Wildcat Writers partnership, especially as many of the international students in the partner class came from countries that are understood as less accepting of LGBTQ identities. For example, several of the international students were from Saudi Arabia, where cross-dressing is illegal. The interviewee’s attention to the power dynamics around sexuality is an important step in asking “other questions” about power beyond issues of language and university or community affiliation. Yet there are more questions to be asked.

Beyond “Where are the language power dynamics?” and “Where is the homophobia?” we might be prompted here to ask, “Where are the racial dynamics?” As the interviewee self-reflexively identified, concerns about how Saudi Arabian students might react to a transgender student can all-too-easily slip into ethnic stereotyping. These concerns may elide how queer cultures are present all over the world, including Saudi Arabia (Labi, 2007), and it is difficult to assume how particular Saudi college students relate to these queer cultures.

⁴ Stories that address transgender identities are particularly scarce in service-learning literature. See Butler (2007) for a notable exception.

Balancing attention to multiple power dynamics, such as sexual and ethnic dynamics in this situation, is a challenging position for service-learning participants to hold.

Taking an even deeper look, we might find ways that these concerns about how international students will respond to someone who is transgender have the potential to relate to larger discourses of nationalism. Puar (2007) described the conceptual frame of “homonationalism,” arguing that as nation-states deem (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of legal protection, the focus on national “tolerance” for LGBTQ subjects allows other countries to be framed as deviant, lesser, and incapable of national sovereignty—thus justifying imperialist intervention. Fueling U.S. exceptionalism with liberal conceptions of LGBTQ rights leads to the dangerously racialized concept of homonationalism, negatively affecting how people from Muslim countries are seen. Though my interviewee was exceptionally aware of power issues and I did not observe homonationalism in the same ways I saw questions of ethnicity and sexuality in this study, given how homonationalism increasingly circulates in the U.S., these notions have the potential to surface when community partners encounter international students in situations such as this.

As this story of the transgender student demonstrates, power dynamics in international TESOL partnerships cannot be reduced to university and community affiliation *or* international and resident status. While I argue that common power hierarchies between server and served can be disrupted when community partners are more proficient in English than the service-learning students, language is only one identity marker at play. As such, the “other question” approach might be valuable for service-learning instructors, students, *and* community partners as they prepare for and reflect on the experience of university-community collaborations. Nelson’s (2006) suggestion that queer TESOL pedagogy should “consider sexual identity in relation to other acts of identity and vice versa” (p. 377) might be useful both within the classroom and beyond, as part of community partnerships. Given the multidimensional nature of power dynamics in service-learning, I turn next to best practice suggestions from Teresa, Jackey, Chris, and America for how teachers and researchers of service-learning can respond to these dynamics.

IMPLICATIONS

Framing, Curriculum, and Reflection

The community partners I interviewed for this case study offered several recommendations for how their stories could have implications for future TESOL partnerships. One key take-away, for high school teacher Teresa Driver, was the importance of “empowering the [participants] that you would typically think would be less powerful.” She offered two areas where service-learning practitioners can help realign power dynamics to be more egalitarian: through the structure of the service-learning class and through framing. She explained that she and the college instructor partner designed the first unit around poetry because this was an area of strength for the high school students. The high school students had been preparing for the poetry competition “Poetry Out Loud,” memorizing poems for a performance. The college instructor assigned the college students to write essays on the poems the high school students were performing, which positioned the high school students as experts who could help their partners generate ideas for the essay. Teresa appreciated how the college instructor changed the curriculum she had been planning in order to center the knowledge of the community partners, which helped shift the problematic dynamics that can occur if college students are seen only as “mentors” for the younger students.

At the same time, as Teresa identified, partnerships should also be built in such a way as to honor the contributions of the international students as well. Askildson, Kelly, and Mick (2013) provided several examples of service projects that rely on the cultural knowledges of international students, such as preparing meals from home countries for community members, producing plays based on fairy tales from home countries, and offering cultural presentations. Maintaining a balance of expertise is important, as the goal is not to disrupt traditional power dynamics to the extent that international students are framed as incompetent and grammatically inept, therefore devaluing their culture and contributions. Structuring partnerships so as to balance the assets of all participants and allow both community and university participants to be “experts” can help service-learning teachers create more equitable partnerships.

Teresa also suggested intentional verbal framing of the partnership in order to bring out what both sides, but especially community partners, offer the collaboration. She explained that responsible attention to power dynamics “starts with making sure that [participants] on both sides of the partnership know that they have something to share, that they have something that is valuable. That it’s not them in a passive place.” She verbally stressed with her students that studying

in a foreign country can be lonely, and encouraged them to take on the role of cultural ambassador and social support for their college partners. Teresa also prepared them with feedback strategies for how to respond to their partners' writing. In particular, it can be helpful for community partners to know that language acquisition is supported when international students have the opportunity to interact for sustained periods of time with target language speakers, especially when community members give immediate feedback and negotiate meaning with language learners (Askildson, Kelly, & Mick, 2013). Being explicitly aware that working through misunderstandings and offering language feedback in the moment supports language learning can help community partners own their role as language teachers. Teresa also encouraged students to draw out their partners, to foster in them a love of poetry, and to help them feel welcome in their temporary home, and charged them with these tasks as civic responsibilities. Her framing translated to her students, as Jackey, Chris, and America echoed these goals in their descriptions of the partnership. They did not respond to my questions merely as high school "mentees" but as partners who were aware of the linguistic, social, and intellectual support they could offer the college students. Framing by community partners and college teachers can help counteract the server/served binary that can develop in service-learning. TESOL partnerships in particular, with their changing dynamics of who is the language "expert," can offer possibilities for a framing that honors the contributions of community members as well as the cultural and linguistic resources of service-learners.

A second significant implication is the need for ongoing reflection on the service-learning partnership *among community partners*. As service-learning scholars Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) wrote, reflection is the "glue" that binds experience and learning, and reflection is considered one of the central components to service-learning practice for students (p. 16). While the importance of reflection is traditionally emphasized for service-learning classes, community partners in this study emphasized the need for reflection on the community side as well—before, during, and after the partnership. Teresa argued for the significance of "a continuing open dialogue about cultural difference, one that starts before they ever meet and ends after they are all done talking." She described how she and the college instructor met regularly to have reflective conversations about how to best structure the partnership, "and the frequency of those meetings made a difference." They discussed potential dynamics that might emerge with Teresa's students who were autistic and transgender; talked with each other about how to pair the high school and college students, considering

personality, motivation, and language proficiency; and brainstormed together about issues that emerged. For example, they intentionally grouped international students who had low English proficiency with a student of the same native language who spoke English more confidently, and paired more outgoing students with students who were less vocal in class. These reflection sessions allowed them to adapt and realign their partnership as the semester progressed.

Teresa also held regular reflection discussions and cross-cultural training with her class, and shared with me that she hoped to do even more in-depth reflection with her students in future partnerships. These reflection sessions allowed her to gauge how her students were experiencing the partnership and identify problems as they emerged. After every in-person interaction with the college students, Teresa invited her students to create a collaborative chart of what was positive, what could be changed for next time, and what was, in her words, “just plain weird.” It was during one of these discussions that America shared that her partner had commented about her appearance. This led to a class discussion about different cultural norms of appropriate conversation topics and different constructions of beauty. After the class discussion, Teresa followed up with America to see if America wanted to handle the situation herself or if she felt more comfortable having the instructors talk to her partner, and when America requested support, Teresa was able to work with the college instructor to address the situation. Teresa might never have known about this problematic interaction if she had not created space for reflection.

Reflection among community partners created opportunities for the high school students to wrestle with the challenges of cross-cultural interaction, think critically about the socially constructed nature of norms, and prepare to interact with their partners respectfully. Teresa reported complex conversations about, for example, what to do if the high school students disagreed fundamentally with policies of international students’ home countries—such as the fact that women are forbidden to drive in Saudi Arabia. Teresa offered the pedagogical suggestion of drawing connections between international policies that were disconcerting to students and problematic domestic policies, such as Arizona border policies, and posing questions about the extent to which average participants in a society should be judged or held accountable for these policies. Teresa also shared stories from her own cross-cultural blunders, and described how some common American phrases have different and sometimes humorous meanings in different cultures, in order to help her students absorb, as she explained, that “what is normal one place is not normal somewhere else.” I would add the suggestion to directly address language ideologies with community partners, challenging

participants to unpack and critique the nativist ideologies implicit in common sayings such as “We’re in America” or “I couldn’t understand a word he said” (Shuck, 2004). Discussions such as these can prepare community partners to work with international students in a spirit of cultural humility, while also challenging them to think critically about the cultural differences they observe. These preparations may be especially needed given, as Perren, Grove, and Thornton (2013) reported, how international students can sometimes experience racist comments from community members at service sites.

Teresa stressed the importance of preparing community partners to interact with international students during her interview with me, while verbally wrestling through many of the complexities of responding to cultural difference without judging. It was particularly challenging, Teresa noted, because if she had had a class of predominantly white students, she would have focused on the dangers of cultural appropriation, the importance of not “saving” people from other cultures, and the need to “recognize your privilege and not try to absolve yourself some way.” But, Teresa added, she did not have a predominantly privileged class. She had students who had experienced cultural marginalization. What does preparation for cross-cultural interaction look like with this complex web of identities? Teresa self-reflexively discussed her process of preparing students, and wondered if there might be even better ways of approaching community partner preparation. One future step for the field of TESOL service-learning may be to provide resources to community partners on how to prepare to collaborate with international students, drawing on the insights of community partners like Teresa who are experienced in TESOL service-learning, as well as insights from scholars who specialize in intercultural communication and multicultural education. Resources such as these might include both suggestions for fostering critical conversations about cultural difference and practical strategies for communicating with language learners, such as slowing speech rate, avoiding slang, allowing opportunities for language learners to confirm understanding, and communicating small amounts of information at a time—factors that have been shown to impact the comprehension of international students in community sites (Perren, 2008).

As Teresa and the high school students noticed, power dynamics between community partners and international students can be unstable and potentially fraught with problems—as well as full of learning opportunities that come from reflecting on and addressing problems. Service-learning instructors and community partners can work together, through the structure of the curriculum, the way the partnership is framed for community partners and students, and opportunities for community partners to reflect, to intervene in these power

dynamics and create more generative spaces for community partners, as well as students, to learn.

Reciprocity in TESOL Service-Learning

As those who have participated in TESOL service-learning are well aware, bringing aspects of language acquisition into the already complex process of service-learning has its challenges. Many of the high school students offered statements such as, “It was hard to understand them [the international students] at times” (C. Demarra, personal interview, May 20, 2014) and the high school students reported forgetting their partners’ names because they could not remember how to pronounce them (J. Torres, personal interview, May 20, 2014). In Teresa’s words, “There were definitely language barriers that didn’t ever get breached.” She noticed less fluency in oral interactions than in the writing the college students submitted, which made face-to-face connections between the high school and college students difficult. Barriers existed that were not present in partnerships with native-speaking college students, and this may have impacted the benefits high school students received from the partnership. When I asked the twelve high school students who worked with *mainstream* composition classes about what they “got out of” Wildcat Writers, they discussed the quality of writing feedback they received from their college partners and shared with me how their college partners were able to give them inside insights into college culture. These types of reflections were absent from my discussions with Jackie, Chris, Teresa, and America. I found myself wondering about what, exactly, the high school students in TESOL Wildcat Writers partnerships were gaining, and how these partnerships were reciprocal.

Yet, curiously, when I asked the three high school students if they would chose to work with international or mainstream composition classes in the future, all three of them chose international. Their depictions of what they gained were more abstract than the benefits described by high school students who worked with native-speaking classes: They appreciated the opportunity to interact with people from around the world. In terms of second language acquisition theory, the high school students valued the chance to develop their “Intercultural Communicative Competence” (Byram, 1997), which is “the ability to understand and relate to people from other countries” (5).⁵ Intercultural Communicative

⁵ Byram’s (1997) concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence assumes that communication is occurring primarily in a language foreign to the speaker, but the broader questions addressed by this model also apply to intercultural communication happening in

Competence involves skills such as building and maintaining meaningful relationships with people of different backgrounds, interpreting documents and events from other cultures, acquiring new knowledge of a culture from informants, and demonstrating a willingness to decenter and take up other cultural perspectives. In describing what she received, America offered, “Experience with different types of people.” She appreciated the chance “to have the different cultures interact with each other.” Jackey suggested that the effort required to understand across difference may have pushed everyone to learn,⁶ and advised, “I think you should continue to try to connect different students together, like even if it’s hard for them to understand sometimes.” Difficulty communicating can help both community partners and second language learners develop “strategic competence,” the ability to find ways to get meaning across, such as rephrasing or asking for clarification (van Ek, 1986, p. 55).

In addition, when discussing benefits of community partnerships with international students, Teresa shared a story of one of her students who connected immediately with his college partner, a student from Saudi Arabia. The two bonded on a social level, sharing stories about girls and laughing together. The following summer, the high school student joined the military and came back to school wearing a t-shirt that said “Infidel.” Teresa added, “He came back with a whole lot of attitude [about Muslim countries], and I think I need to remind him that the guy he hung out with and talked about girls with is one of *them*.” She valued the chance for her students to form personal connections with students from around the world as an opportunity to potentially complicate dominant narratives of particular regions of the world. In other words, Teresa was hoping for the interaction across difference to foster in her student some of the attitudes that comprise Intercultural Communicative Competence: a willingness to engage otherness with a disposition of equality, an interest in discovering other perspectives on cultural phenomena and events, and an openness to question the common cultural understandings and assumptions—such as negative perceptions of Muslim countries—in one’s home environment (Byram, 1997).

Teresa advised other community partners who would be working with ELL classes to open up their expectations of what constituted a reciprocal partnership, saying, “Make sure that you understand that the partnership can be successful without your expectations being fulfilled.” She explained that if she had measured

the speaker’s native language(s), so I suggest the model is relevant to community partners interacting with international students.

⁶ Facing gaps in communication can also help second language learners notice areas for growth, pushing them to modify output and therefore prompting language learning (Swain, 1995).

the value of the exchange by whether or not all of her students received detailed feedback on their writing, she might consider the partnership negatively, but she felt it was beneficial for her students “to realize how big the world was.” While Teresa and her students did have suggestions for how to foster stronger writing feedback between students, such as simplifying the technical process to comment on writing or providing more direction and accountability to students on their feedback assignments, and I would argue it is critical to keep these concrete outcomes in mind, it is also important to acknowledge that community partners in this study identified the opportunity to interact with people from around the world as a key benefit to working with ELL students. Service-learning scholars have long championed service-learning’s potential to allow college students to cross social boundaries and interact with people of different cultures and life experiences (Hayes & Cuban, 1997), but this may be an opportunity that is valued by community partners, as well. These findings resonate with insights from non-profit staff who worked with international students in a previous study; in the words of one staff member at a homeless shelter, the partnership was valuable because “the visiting students taught our kids about their homelands and opened their eyes to different parts of the world and new cultures” (Askildson, Kelly, & Mick, 2013, p. 234). TESOL partnerships in particular may offer heightened possibilities for community partners to build relationships with people of various worldviews, nationalities, and languages, suggesting the potential value of direct service partnerships for community members.

Furthermore, this case study suggests that TESOL partnerships may hold the potential to reshuffle power dynamics between community partners and college students. As hierarchies between server and served have frequently been a point of concern for service-learning scholars (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009), TESOL collaborations may be generative sites for disrupting, reformulating, studying, and reflecting on power in community-based learning.

As this study was relatively small, and it is one of the first published studies of community perspectives of TESOL partnerships, more research into this area is needed to further explore how language and culture acquisition impact service-learning partnerships. However, as I have demonstrated in this study, local factors such as border proximity can affect a TESOL partnership, and particular contexts strongly shape service-learning dynamics; therefore, generalized, published research cannot offer sufficient knowledge into community perspectives of service-learning at the local level. My suggestion to service-learning practitioners is to take time to listen to the community partners involved in service-learning collaborations. Informal reflections and opportunities for feedback, over a meal or

coffee, can provide invaluable insights for both community partners and service-learning instructors. I left my meetings with Teresa, Jackey, America, and Chris with new ideas for how to design Wildcat Writers, more awareness of some of the problems that were cropping up in our partnerships, and renewed energy to tackle the challenging process of service-learning. Especially in TESOL partnerships, in which so little published research exists on community perspectives, I argue that one of our most valuable sources of knowledge on service-learning is the community partners who collaborate, (mis)communicate, and connect with our students.

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