Improving Students' Literacy Awareness Through Service Learning in UAE: *Children's Language and Activities Bag (CLAB)*

Karima Almazroui
United Arab Emirates University
k.almazroui@uaeu.ac.ae

This study presents the service learning experience of university students and invites teachers at all levels to make use of the content to improve awareness of the role of literacy. In an elementary Language Education course taught at Al-Ain in the United Arab Emirates, 23 students designed a language bag for elementary students to improve children's language ability and promote education and reading in English. Students transformed a curriculum reuirement into a service learning project to meet the needs of long-term hospitalized children who could not attend school and were considered literacy-deprived. Theories, concepts and importance of service learning were introduced. University students' reflections showed they realized a greater sense of self, developed a partnership with community members and improved communication skills through discussions and language activities.

"I read and forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand." Confucius
There is more than one way to define service learning, but many definitions agree that service learning is an approach where the learner employs the curriculum to serve the community. Service learning puts the power of learning in students' hands and creates meaningful, purposeful learning experiences (Fiske, 2001). In service learning, university students, in this case pre-service teachers, learn twice, first in class when they are taught content and second in the field when they provide service, make use of the content they have learned, and modify their learning experiences.

Service learning helps students define community needs and provides possible service to meet these needs. In other words, the central activity, making and using Children's Language and Activities Bags (CLAB) integrated service with learning in intentional ways (National Service-learning Clearinghouse, 2008).

In the "Language Education in the Elementary School" course, university students were introduced to the concept of service learning and how to employ course content to improve children's lives. Students were involved in meaningful tasks that were tailored to help students teach and practice what they had learned in class. These tasks were designed to address community needs and specific learning outcomes. As their feedback shows, designing a language activity bag for children helped the students use course information, engage with the community, become closer to each other, and have a greater sense of creativity and belonging within society.

The idea was to meet the literacy needs of a specific population and allow them to benefit from what university students have learned. According to the social workers in the local hospital, children with cancer and other long-term hospitalized children were unable to go to school because of their weak immune systems. The hospital did offer libraries or other literacy programs for these children. In this case, no homeschooling or hospital-schooling was available, and children spent most of their time in bed watching television.

Meanwhile, university students in the Language Education course studied language education theories and their application in practice without employing this information in practical teaching situations. As a result, this research was designed to bring together language teachers and pre-service teachers, parents, and hospital social workers for their mutual benefit. The goals of the current research were to:

1. Improve the quality of teaching and interaction in professional settings.
2. Improve the understanding of course content and expand students' experiences in real situations.
3. Increase knowleadge and awarness of the student's role in the community.
4. Increase awareness of specific community needs, such as long-term hospitalization of children who are deprived of reading and other language activities.
5. Meet community needs by designing programs and choosing materials and activities.

Literature Review

Furco (as cited by Elias and others, 2003) compared American high school students who were engaged in service learning to other students who were not given that opportunity. Academic outcomes were measured through content mastery, problem solving skills, and attitude toward learning. The first group surpassed the second group in all measures; combining learning with service provided academic skills and the opportunity to use these skills.

In an examination of University of Michigan undergraduate students involved in the Lion's Quest service learning program, Laird and Black (2002) found a reduction in school dropouts and alcohol and drug use. The researchers asserted that university students who participated in classes where service learning occurred showed greater progress in the five core social-emotional competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, collaborative skills, and responsibility.

Service learning is different from serving the community. Service learning is tied to specific learning outcomes, whereas other patterns of community service do not focus on this. The current study bears out the findings of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time Center for Research on Women (1999) that engaging students to read for other children solidifies the reading skills of both younger and older children. In addition, university students may learn responsibility, patience and practice teaching skills. Reach Out and Read in Cleveland, Ohio is a program where volunteers read aloud to children and go over the reading techniques with parents

while waiting in the pediatrician's waiting room. In addition, the pediatric counselor explains the importance of reading aloud to children and the strategies to match children with books (ROR, 2003). This advocacy was incorporated into the Language Education students contact with parents when their children were taken to the playroom for language activities.

Service Learning Objectives

The main objective of the service learning course was to provide an opportunity for university learners to understand curricula through experiential projects where the community benefited and learning outcomes were met. The service learning opportunity was intended to pave the way for experiential learning where learners would work collaboratively yet independently, making choices and reflecting on their learning progress (Solsau & Yost, 2007).

Efficient service learning is achieved by inviting university learners to reflect on their learning progress throughout the project. Learners need to examine their comprehension of what they have learned so far, showing critical thinking, creativity and problem solving skills, to share feelings and passion and, finally, reflect on their learning experience through service learning and on the project experiences.

In addition, service learning aids university learners to strengthen rapport with the community and define its needs. Partnership with community brings learners and community members together to achieve the same goal. Being involved in such projects eliminates "racial and cultural gaps, provides young people with strong role models; and strengthens community infrastructures" (National Youth Leadership Council, 2008, p. 4).

Implementation of Service Learning in the Classroom

When planning for service learning, learning outcomes were considered. Effective projects were designed to invite university learners to apply their knowledge of more than one subject matter. Service learning can be an ongoing evaluation process for both learners and teachers. It can be a transformational process for both parties to experiment, grow, and reflect (National Youth Leadership Council, 2008).

Identifying, planning, preparation, and implementation of the service learning projects were carried out collaboratively. Involving university learners in such discussions was intended to provide a deeper understanding of content and allow them to revisit and re-evaluate their understanding of the subject content (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2007).

We started by asking questions and inviting university learners to think of possible outlets for this information. I described past experiences and projects about previous students' feelings, achievements and changes they made in the community. Then students were invited to think and provide suggestions about possible groups who might benefit from their work. Students were encouraged to seek more information and ideas through exploring different knowledge sources (National Youth Leadership Council, 2008).

A Service Learning Experience in the United Arab Emirates

According to the course syllabus "Language Education in the Elementary School," the course aimed at providing university students with a background about the basics of general

language education in elementary school. It exhibited theories about first (Arabic) language acquisition and bilingualism and how both languages interacted. In addition, it provided students with basic skills related to the various approaches and techniques of language education. It also aimed at enabling students to discover language errors that were made by pupils and seek out ways to introduce remedial programs to correct them. The course was taught in English which was students' second language.

The course had two tasks: the first task was for each university student to choose an elementary school-aged child and practice reading, writing, and other activities taught throughout the course. That child could be a relative, neighbor, or a school child that the student visited. The second task was to design a language activity bag where students put together materials appropriate for a child at the elementary school level. In addition, students had to write a letter to the learner's caregiver explaining the use and importance of every item in the bag.

Twenty-three university students registered for the course. Throughout the course, they were constantly reminded that language acquisition theories and language scaffolding strategies become meaningful when practiced among language learners. At the beginning of the course, I went over this task in detail without imposing suggestions. As the students became accustomed to the course outline and content, the concept of service learning was introduced, and more questions were generated to help students make use of course goals.

As noted, based on course outcomes, students were asked to design a language activity bag for children and we called it (CLAB). An open discussion was held to generate students' ideas for creative items that might go in the CLAB. Each CLAB was unique, but in general it contained coloring pencils and books, safe scissors and construction paper, children's books, educational CDs, and soft toys or stuffed animals for young children. For the older children, there were educational CDs, stories in Arabic and English, handwriting books, stationery, educational games, educational video CDs, children's magazines, and math and science activity books. After that, university students were invited to think of how the community might benefit from the products they assembled.

University students were given the choice to transform the task into a service learning project if they desired, and all were motivated to do so. They also agreed to write a paper reflecting on their professional growth throughout the cycles. I went over the concept and the cycle of reflection that I believe should accompany service learning increase students' familiarity with the importance of ongoing consideration of service learning experiences.

About the requirements for every cycle of the project, discussions were established first in groups and then with everyone together in the class. University students were given the responsibility to target the population they thought would benefit the most from what they had learned in the course. The week after, students came to class with a final decision to visit the cancer wing of a children's hospital in Dubai. All students agreed to participate in the service learning project, and the service learning cycles consisted of the following four categories. Identifying community needs

Students suggested visiting the cancer wing of a children's hospital because the children there seldom left their beds. Students called several hospitals and discovered that young cancer patients were rarely involved in language improvement activities, usually receiving toys from outsiders, and were prone to depression because of their long illness. The university students choose Dubai, because the hospital there welcomed educational institutions who developed activities for children. Students were asked to begin a reflective journal about what they learned regarding the community and how to identify its needs.

Planning

Students worked collaboratively in designing their CLABs and generating ideas for activities for the children. At this stage, students were asked to add to their reflective journal the major things they had changed and what new ideas they had generated, adding authentic materials such as children's cooking books and magazines. I had a student who put together a "Raising a Scientist" bag where she added an encyclopedia, plastic human organs and a skeleton.

Note: All pictures were published based on parents' permission, students' permission to publish the photos is also available.

Preparation

Students brought their bags to class along with a letter to the caregiver. Students demonstrated their work and reviewed major course outlines, such as the appropriateness of the items to a specific age or gender, integrating technology, reading readiness materials, and how to provide more creative language activities. All the CLABs were checked and letters to caregivers were read before implementation. If any item in the bag or caregiver's letter was not suitable, students provided advice and help to each other. At this point, students were asked to reflect on their learning progress and feelings and hopes for the visit. Confirmation was sent to the hospital regarding our visit.

Implementation

We arrived at the children's hospital at 9:30 in the morning carrying more than 35 CLABs. Many students surprised me by having more than one CLAB to be distributed. Students were shocked to see young children suffering, without hair, and enduring other difficulties associated with chemotherapy. Because these children were not allowed to leave their rooms, university students split up and began reading and doing activities until the nurses asked students to let the children rest.

Each child was given a CLAB according to his or her age and interests. After that, the students and I went to other children's wings to distribute the rest of the CLABs and to read to the children. Children were allowed to meet the university students in the playroom under medical and social worker supervision. Students read aloud to the children, shared other stories, distributed coloring pencils and papers, and tried out different language games and activities. Many parents joined us, playing and reading to children, and parents asked questions about their children's language and academic status.

played with a child

Discussion and Conclusion

When the students finished with the young patients, they returned to *A Language game is* the university. Students talked freely about their learning experience and their mixed emotions. Students were provided with guidelines and focus for the reflection papers. The following

criteria were established for the writing of reflections in which students wrote about specific items to explain their growth and learning development in every step of the cycle.

1. Major things learned through the project.
2. Influence of the project on character (self-confidence, efficacy, sense of belonging, being a role model...).
3. Influence of the project on collaborative work skills.
4. Influence of the project on academic skills (problem solving, generating ideas, brainstorming, writing skills, etc.).
5. The quality of the service provided to the community through the project.
6. Things to do again or avoid if the experience were repeated.
7. Importance of letters to parents on academic growth.
8. Implementation of the project on the individual's own future teaching.

Students added to their comments regarding the hospital visit. All the students agreed to submit their papers for analysis. Collected journals were not given a grade. Twenty-three reflection papers were collected in the last step in the service learning cycle. These reflection papers were checked to ensure that students answered the focus question of every step of the cycle, and then, these reflections were categorized. I went over all the written reflections based on students' answers and according to the influence of the experience on students' academic growth, personal character, self efficacy and satisfaction. Students' responses were tallied to provide me with deep insight about the students' learning progress.

Influence of the Experience on Students' Academic Growth

In terms of academic growth, the experience helped university students communicate and orchestrate academic learning activities, such as dealing with a variety of knowledge sources, problem-solving, brainstorming, communication skills, and group work. In addition, these skills paid off when used in a 'real' context by providing planned services to the community.

The 23 students reported they learned different things throughout the course. One student said, "I felt like I had been in a different world and now I am back to reality." Another reflected, "I never thought of hospital children as literacy deprived." A third wrote, "I felt like a professor explaining to parents how to help children with reading and to catch up with school tasks."

Table 1. Students' Reflections

Percentage	Reflections
100%	Agreed on importance of right books for children
91%	Learned reading aloud techniques
90$	Learned different reading and writing instructions
86%	Acquired new concepts, i.e., reading and writing readiness
86%	Learned how to integrate puppetry
82%	Learned to use authentic materials in language education
78%	Able to employ games in language education

Table 1 indicates the student's feelings about the experience. One student wrote "I learned how to do a story tree and vocabulary puzzles. I really think that language teaching can be more fun if the teacher becomes creative and doesn't limit her abilities to students' textbooks."

Table 2. Influence of the project on group work

Percentage	Influence on group work
95%	Reported their academic skills improved overall since employing course content in practice
74%	Reported improvement in their academic skills, i..e., problem solving and ability to generate ideas
65%	Reported improved in collaboration and group; skills

The way the students felt about the influence of the project on group work was very important in the information it provided. I was amazed that one of the responses was so honest from a student who wrote, "I always hated group work, I always worked and the remaining group played or slept in the dorm, and then they all got rewarded for my work and I didn't want to be the bad guy and tell on them, but working on this project was different. You worked alone but still with a group, and everyone was evaluated based on the quality of his own work which got better when discussed with the group."

Table 3. Instructions for parents

Percentage	Instruction - Parents
92%	Believed it was important to have parents involved in the CLAB
64%	Since parents read to children, they need clear instructions to get the most benefit out of CLAB
21%	Parents should be involved because they are most often with the children and language activities should remain a family habit

Students were highly considerate of parental needs. They enjoyed interacting with the parents who played and read to their children. The parents asked questions about the correct way to read to their children and students offered them advice about the best approach.

Table 4. Influence of the project on student's character

Percentage	Student characteristics
90+%	Reported an improvement in their sense of self-esteem and confidence
90%	Reported they felt like a part of society
82%	Reported an improvement in a sense of self-efficacy

Regarding the influence of the project one student said, "I couldn't imagine talking to strangers, and in hospital I found myself talking to parents," and another added, "I became so confident that I used puppets for the first time in front of people that I didn't even know."

The most important element in the project was choice. The project was flexible because the students tailored their CLABs according to their own beliefs, provided appropriate activities for the children, and chose a place. The choice began when they agreed to alter their course task

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into a service learning project. I found that to have a strong impact on them in that they showed great commitment, responsibility, and enthusiasm throughout the project.

Students' voices were clear in their written reflections. One student wrote, "I think I am going to be a successful and creative teacher." "Now that I went to the hospital," said another student, "I will never stop looking for other children wanting to read." One student wrote, "It was very difficult for me to leave the hospital knowing that children are still waiting to hear more stories."

Students expressed feelings freely in their journals; some journals included deep feelings and impressions of the visit, such as, "I cried really hard when I was reading to 2 year old Ahmad, knowing that he may not live another day." "I felt so humane and down to earth," said one student. Another said, "Finally, I found myself worthy," and "I felt so strong and weak at the same time; I was reminding myself in the hospital not to cry because this is not what we came to do."

Finally, the experience had influenced university students' perspective of self, and motivation toward education had improved after the project. The project succeeded because practical service experience was integrated and knowledge was employed to meet acute community problems. University students were able to link curriculum to community needs. It was the first time for university students to work directly with school aged children, to deliver what they had already studied in previous classes and in this class, and to provide a service they were trained to do with children who needed that service.

Generally, all students were content with their experience as reported in their reflections, and no complaints or discomforts were expressed. Forty-three percent reflected that thought they should add more toys to their CLABs, noting a compassionate change in perspectives on what constituted age-appropriate learning because they didn't realize how young and infirm many of the children would be.

Many suggestions for improving the course were extracted from students' reflection papers. One student offered, "If I was to go to the hospital again, I would design special workshops for parents about basic language teaching skills." Another added, "I would invite hospital social workers to our class to learn how to read to children." Seventeen percent of the students suggested building a special children's library in the hospital. Nine percent of the students reported they would have liked to remain with the children for a longer time. Nine percent reported they would not choose the cancer wing because it was a very emotional experience.

As I reflect on this experience with my students, I understand now how these written reflections provided me, a classroom instructor, with a deep understanding of how effective it can be to use service learning as a vehicle for proving teaching tools taught from a theoretical perspective. The students' comments showed reflection on their academic growth, express their feelings, their role in the community, and how deeply their self-esteem increased. Respect for self and others, efficacy, confidence, and collaborative skills were outcomes created as a result of service learning (Billig, 2000). These reflective thinking journals helped students connect with their feelings and community better—to find themselves as future teachers. For me, I came to realize how important practical involvement in classroom work is and the effect it can have on students.

Note: All pictures were published based on parents' permission, students' permission to publish the photos is also available.

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