

# 5

## **Service Learning and Foreign Language Acquisition: Working with the Migrant Community**

**Susan Wehling**

*Valdosta State University*

Language learning within the context of service-learning presents a unique opportunity for students, educators, and community members alike. While there are numerous definitions of service-learning, the National and Community Services Act of 1990 defines service-learning with a set of four criteria, basic to most service-learning endeavors:

- learning and development through active participation in thoughtfully organized community-service oriented experiences
- a structured experience integrated into the academic curriculum
- an opportunity to apply knowledge and acquired skills in real-life situations
- a sense of caring for others

Most service-learning projects focus on the development of a more civic-minded student whose increased knowledge of democratic values through the service-learning experience benefits the community and society at large (Vadeboncoeur, Rahm, Aguilera, & LeCompte, 1996). Service-learning projects focus on issues such as homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, hunger, teen pregnancy, voter apathy, media literacy, and unemployment (Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Maybach 1996). Service-learning projects may be included in programs from kindergarten to post-secondary institutions. The ideas behind service-learning are not new to education. John Dewey, the father of modern education, endorsed the idea that, in order to develop intellectual capacity and critical thinking skills, learning experiences must be authentic and not divorced from the world outside the class (Dewey, 1997). More than 1105 college campuses, high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools are now actively involved in service-learning and campus-community out-reach programs (Cohen & Kinsey, 1992).

Because many school systems have service learning requirements (Markus et al., 1993), service-learning in support of migrant and immigrant communities can provide a national outlet for foreign language students in the United States. The outcomes of service-learning mesh well with the educational guide-

lines set forth by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language, the American Association of Teachers of French, the American Association of Teachers of German, and the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, as part of a national collaborative effort to develop high standards for language learning. The guidelines fall into five categories: communication, cultures, communities, connections, and comparisons (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996).

As the focus on a communicative-based approach to language acquisition in the classroom grows, it becomes increasingly apparent that real life exchanges with L1 (native) speakers eventually need to be a part of the language learning experience. The value in the shift in the classroom from a focus primarily about language and structure to the ability to use a foreign language competently in speaking and listening, reading, and writing has been clearly documented and implemented in a variety of ways (Omaggio, 1993; Tschirner, 1996). Students feel frustrated, however, when after one to three years of foreign language study, they are often unable to communicate to or understand the local L1 speakers. The service-learning component offers an opportunity for dialogue with native speakers whose spoken Spanish differs greatly from classroom tapes but who are more representative of people with whom students might work should they chose to work in the United States and use Spanish in their professions.<sup>1</sup>

Cultures and communities are clearly addressed through service-learning. Students directly experience a variety of traditions, customs, and dialects, particularly those of Central America and Mexico while working in the community. The diversity within Hispanic communities also becomes apparent as students begin to understand cultural subtleties such as whether the family is from a rural or urban background and whether or not Spanish is their first language. By venturing out into the community, students see beyond invisible walls which often divide neighborhoods. Having become more familiar with the Hispanic community at home, service-learning students are also more willing to study abroad as the desire to communicate with newly discovered friends provides incentive for them to become fluent. Connections are made between economics, anthropology, history, political science, and other disciplines as students see the actual effects for example, of the North American Free Trade Agreement, on specific individuals.

Many universities have developed specific guidelines for general education outcomes, which often include a demonstration of cross-cultural perspectives and knowledge of other societies, a demonstrated knowledge of principles of ethics, and their employment in the analysis and resolution of moral problems. These national, state, and local mandates challenge foreign language educators to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their language proficiency outside the classroom. This paper will focus specifically on the integration of a service-learning component into an intermediate-level Spanish grammar and conversation class and the possibilities service-learning offers the foreign language educator in general.

## The Service-learning Project

This project took place in a largely agricultural region. During summer months over 24,000 migrant workers and their families take up residence to work with tobacco, cotton, and other crops. Many families eventually stay as labor needs are often year-round. There are many Hispanic migrant/immigrant families that speak little or no English. Similarly, there are a few native English speakers of Spanish. Educators, health professionals, farmers, and many area business people look to the academic community for help.

In the summer of 1997 an intermediate Spanish class attended a local mass in Spanish. This experience was part of class assignment in which students learn about culture through observation of traditional Hispanic customs. The professor, who had been translating for a local domestic shelter, brought along a young pregnant mother, who worked as a migrant worker, and her many children as a break from the domestic shelter where they were staying. Students were far more interested in her and her children than in the church service. Next week in class, students wanted to know more. Where she was from? What was she going to do? What were her options? These questions started an ongoing discussion on culture, migrant workers, US-Latino relations, cross-cultural family values, and relationships that continue to this day. As a result of the class's interest, three students volunteered at the domestic violence shelter; others offered to look for housing for the young woman; and once housing was found, others helped clean and prepare the residence. Students expressed interest in incorporating these kinds of activities into a Spanish class, and a service-learning component was added to the fall term syllabus for the Spanish Composition and Conversation class. A smaller scale version of service-learning was added to the Introduction to Spanish class.<sup>2</sup> From the program's inception, students have been actively involved in defining goals and objectives and in assessing outcomes. This collaborative effort, a goal of service-learning, provides for equal opportunity in articulating needs and goals (Mintz, 1996). In preparation for the service-learning project, students were asked to determine where the Hispanic population resides and where their centers of business are.

Preparation for these classes was new territory, as research regarding service-learning with a foreign language class is virtually non-existent. Once the need within the community was identified, it was necessary to determine whether or not students could successfully fill that need and to determine the length and intensity of the project required, as suggested by Cohen (1994). The needs in this region were basically those of translation services for agencies and families, tutoring and mentoring services for children, especially those unable to speak English in the school system, and work as translators for community educators in the health services. In a survey of those agencies already working with the migrant families, several agencies expressed a desire for student help on a quarterly basis. These agencies included the Department of Human Resources, two Hispanic churches, and the local Migrant Education Agency, which functions under the auspices of

the National Migrant Education Program. With the help of these agencies, three families were designated with whom students could work. Students who chose not to participate were provided with an alternate activity.

Three objectives for the foreign language class with a service-learning component included developing grammar skills, building speaking and listening skills, and increasing cultural awareness. In this project, the first objective, to introduce them to as many advanced grammar concepts as possible and increase their vocabulary while improving their writing skills, was achieved with an appropriate grammar text, a journal written in Spanish documenting their service-learning experience, and a final paper, also written in Spanish, evaluating the service-learning experience, in terms of language acquisition, personal development, and benefit to the community. The second, improving their speaking and listening skills, and the third, to increase in and their understanding of Hispanic culture, were accomplished through the service-learning experience and by means of class visitors from the Hispanic community. The discussion on community needs and the comprehension of cultural similarities and differences with the Hispanic community continued throughout the school term. Weekly guest speakers from various community agencies presented, in the target language, their perspective and their history of working with the Hispanic peoples in the county. Students were exposed to a variety of institutions and individuals using Spanish in their professions.<sup>3</sup> Visitors also allowed students to hear and interact with a variety of dialects and idiomatic expressions. Students were prepared before each visit through a discussion of the agency and/or country associated with each visitor, and they were required to prepare two pertinent questions for each visitor. Students were evaluated on each visitor by means of open-ended exam questions.

Before beginning the service-learning experience, students signed a liability waiver and were required to participate in a multi-cultural conference dealing with migrant children. Students learned about cultural stereotypes regarding migrant workers, important factual cultural differences, and especially about how to work with Hispanic migrant families and children. Cultural aspects such as eye contact, personal space, tone-of-voice, and family matters became an integral part of the courses. (See Appendix A.) Students participated in several games in which different cultural characteristics were practiced. This activity was especially helpful as students, before they went out in the field, were able to discuss how difficult it was, for example, to talk with someone while his or her eyes were lowered. Later, while in the field, students served as cultural liaisons, explaining to perplexed teachers that looking teachers straight in the eye is disrespectful in some Hispanic communities. Selected readings provided background information and a basis for class discussion. In conjunction with class discussions of cultural characteristics specific to the Mexican American Migrant community, students also analyzed Kohlberg's "Iceberg Conception of the Nature of Culture," (Kohlberg, 1981).

Preliminary fieldwork took about three weeks. Arranging schedules for university students, migrant families, and primary and secondary school teachers is a very time-consuming endeavor because of the variety of individual commitments involved. Equally important were the workshops about culturally sensitive

issues with respect to time, commitment, and responsibility. Whereas students can choose not to come to class, choosing not to show up when a migrant family is waiting implies a lack of respect which could negatively affect the program (Mintz & Hesser, 1995). In general the Hispanic migrant community tends to be suspicious of the motives others have when working with them and are reluctant to open up to strangers. Students working with adolescents in the junior high found this information especially helpful when those they were mentoring responded with monosyllabic answers for the first two weeks of the project.

After preliminary fieldwork, initial site visits included the agency worker, the professor, the students, and the families and children they would be mentoring. The site preparation was helpful to all parties; the families felt reassured that this was a serious and honest effort to help educate their children; students felt they were treated in a professional manner. The professor and the agency worker served to facilitate conversation as students were very hesitant to speak initially, and the migrant children and families were also reticent about communicating. This uncertainty on the part of the student about actually speaking in Spanish to a native speaker was one of the biggest obstacles faced at the inception of the program. Students set up either two 30-minute visits or a one-hour visit each week. Institutions were less flexible than families regarding visits, and both required strict guidelines, such as dress codes in the schools and specific and limited hours of visitation with the migrant families. Students who worked with families worked in groups of two to three for safety reasons because the neighborhoods were often classified as “less-than-desirable.” Students learned, however, that neighborhoods are often labeled as such based on fear and ignorance of others. Gender divisions were strictly enforced; that is, males worked with male children and females worked with female children, both to comply with cultural norms and to avoid any possibility of sexual harassment issues. As in study abroad and other programs, this program is not and cannot be risk-free.<sup>4</sup> Although the goals for each project varied, for the most part, the university students were asked to translate, interpret, and mentor. University students constantly were required to make use of their knowledge of Spanish and in so doing accomplished an important course goal. The Hispanic migrant community also benefited in improved English and comprehension skills, higher grades, and greater familiarity with the community at large.

### **Language Skills**

Many students, however, were able to apply the linguistic skills learned in class to their fieldwork. Most student groups formed an internal hierarchy based on speaking ability; those most fluent talked most during the initial visits; those less fluent did as the more fluent students advised them to do. With time, however, all students participated during all visits. Some reported that even though they felt that their spoken Spanish had not improved to the extent they had hoped, what did improve was their attitude towards speaking Spanish outside the class.

“This project reminded me of why I had decided to learn Spanish. . . . I began to look for opportunities to use my Spanish, and I don’t feel frustrated when customers come to the restaurant [where I work] and they don’t know English.” The students in general no longer felt shy or awkward speaking Spanish to strangers. That students were no longer timid regarding speaking Spanish was an extremely important accomplishment, because one of the most frequent impediments language learners face is anxiety of failure or fear of appearing foolish. “When I read the class syllabus, I thought I would die. I didn’t think I could speak with a person who couldn’t speak English,” said one student in her course evaluation.

In their final papers, students wrote about the problems understanding slang, dialects, and unfamiliar vocabulary. Dictionary usage greatly increased, especially as related to the vocabulary need in the region, such as picking cotton, cropping tobacco, and spraying pesticide. Those working in educational settings practiced their commands as they gave instructions to the young students. Circumlocution was mutually beneficial to students and their community counterparts. The applicability of lessons learned in the class exercises was magnified as students worked and translated in real-life settings. One student was caught off-guard as she had forgotten her dictionary and was asked to translate the word ‘head-lice’ (a common problem in the area) and explain why the young student was being sent home. Phonetics came into play as students taught English: “Now I understand more about why we learn about vowels and syllables. I had to write down the words with Spanish sounds, using the Spanish “e” wherever an English “a” sound was needed.” Students taking education courses also got to practice various teaching methodologies in order to facilitate the tutoring process.

Limitations of the service-learning project included the fact that several students improved linguistically only after repeated encouragement. Students who worked with children in the school system felt they spoke less Spanish, as half their time was devoted to speaking English to help with materials, mostly textbooks, written in English. Other students benefited from listening comprehension but had the least opportunity to speak due to the fact that the people with whom they worked insisted on practicing English whenever possible. Although most parties involved believe the program is highly successful, these limitations need to be better addressed in the future.

## **Culture**

The greater issues of social justice and a system which has inadequate resources for those on the margin allowed students to reflect in both negative and positive ways on their own cultures. In dealing with issues related to social justice, several students became so deeply involved that their other classes suffered. The extended hours they spent working with the families in dealing with public health agencies and local law enforcement agencies left many students feeling an overwhelming sensation of helplessness and frustration. Students expected that change would occur rapidly, and they also expected more sympathy from commu-

nity officials in matters like checking into exorbitantly high water bills. Therefore, in such a service-learning program, it is important to talk about limits, expectations, and perspectives for all those involved. On a positive note, students were able to facilitate the Hispanic migrant student registration in the city and county schools because they were able to identify the proper Hispanic surname to be used when addressing families. They, in a sense, were teaching culture as they explained to school officials that children should be addressed by the first, not the second, of the two last names on their certification papers. They also helped teachers understand that while many Hispanic migrant children are proficient in speaking English, reading comprehension skills take much longer to develop.

Students, while critical of what they perceived to be a lack of overall concern regarding the less fortunate in the community, commented that they felt very proud of the work that many concerned citizens and agencies were doing. The classroom visitors, the agency leaders, and local educators provided them with positive role models. One student who wrote, "There are three words that describe the staff and members of the Hispanic Baptist Mission: friendly, warm and charitable." This student is now president of the campus chapter of the organization "Bread for the World." A recurring theme was the reciprocal nature of the project. The students assisted their Hispanic neighbors, but several were hired by local agencies to continue their work on a paid basis.

### **Cultural Conflicts**

During the program, several cultural problems were encountered. The first involved an African-American student and the family from Oxaca she was working with. They had called her a "mollita," and she knew it was related to her color. She had asked an affluent Mexican woman, who told her it was a rude racial slur. The director of the local migrant agency explained to the class that while racism exists among some migrant workers, many Hispanic migrant workers use the term "mollita" to describe African-Americans. It is the context and the speaker that determine whether the term was used positively or pejoratively. This family obviously liked the student very much; so she was able to accept their apology, and the agency agreed to work with the family in educating them about racism in the United States.

The second incident involved a group of nursing students who were planning a health project for the migrant camps. The nursing students were involved in a service-learning project from the School of Nursing, and the Spanish student was translating as part of her foreign language service-learning project. Initially, the nursing students had planned to discuss sexually transmitted diseases. The student translator relayed her concerns about translating this material, as she had learned from class and her field work that health concerns regarding such private matters as intercourse are generally thought of as taboo, especially for discussion between young single women (students) and married men (migrant workers). As a result the nursing students changed their topic to dealing with pesticide poisoning.



One of the challenges still facing the service-learning class is that students tend to perceive their own experience as constituting the truth about the experience of others. One of the most prevalent examples was that students tended to project their childhood as a rule of thumb for others: "Esteban and Pedro need time to be children; they need to run, shout, play, and go to the park. We took them to play football like my Dad used to do with us." Students were initially unable to see the cultural bias implicated in such statements. They also made assertions such as "Hispanic battered women tend to be less emotionally involved," based on their one term experience with one family. The tendency for students to draw on the authority of their own experiences when interpreting data or issues seems to be commonly observed (Vadeboncouer et al., 1996.)

### **Interdisciplinary Benefits**

The interdisciplinary nature of the project provided many scholastic benefits. Whereas there was a general feeling that this was a worthwhile endeavor, many of the students began to grapple with the larger issues of social and economic justice. In their evaluations and final projects, they were able to contextualize theoretical concerns presented in other disciplines with regard to issues of inequality, national economic measures, and foreign governments. Final papers included commentary on poverty and class struggle issues, spatial constraints, zoning plans, insights regarding public education, and mainstreaming. Students were keenly observant, commenting on various factors: the absence of public transportation, the lack of sufficient lighting with which to do homework, extended family relationships and gender roles, and the higher expectations placed on older children especially in regard to child care. While tutoring Mexican junior high students on the Mexican-American War as described by the American history textbook, students were able to understand the practical applications of theoretical concepts like ethnocentrism and cultural relativity, and the maxim that history is written by the victors. Along the same lines, university students also learned from their various community partners why they had migrated to the United States and how they viewed the United States. Students learned firsthand that the civil wars they study in Hispanic Civilization classes leave living scars on the survivors who come here for political and economic refuge.

### **Conclusions**

There was a much greater tendency at the end of the term to see the migrant population as individuals, with unique histories, rather than as a group of "dark-skinned, lazy and quick-tempered people" (Skidmore, 1997, p.2). The intimacy of the home visits allowed for a closer inspection of cultural similarities and diversities. The South has generally been considered a place of tradition with a strong emphasis on the family. The students recognized the Hispanic migrant focus on family, especially extended and non-traditional families. Students found



many similarities between the South and Latin America. Family and honor were discovered to be common values. The rural background of most Hispanic migrant workers and the respectful attitude toward elders and those in authority were other commonalities several students noticed. A running comment through final papers dealt with the generosity of the families:

Lisa and I brought some Halloween treats to Pablo and Angela's [students they were tutoring] house. After studying we were cutting the pumpkin, letting the kids scoop out the seeds when Pablo fell backwards and smashed all the cupcakes. Selena [Pablo's mother] laughed for five straight minutes. The experience touched my heart. My father would have shouted, but Selena just smiled and laughed showing a generosity of spirit and love towards her family and that her "family values" were very centered. (Names have been changed to protect the individuals' privacy.)

Several students were more appreciative of the difficulty of being a working parent and raising children in today's society, especially on a very limited budget. Students were able to reflect on their own progress in developing cultural sensitivity:

When I first started this project I thought, "Why in the world do they have so many children?" Now I understand I was projecting my own values onto them, and I understand that not only are there many reasons people have big families, but that also there are many small Hispanic families and many big families outside the Hispanic community.

Six students, those going into the teaching profession were very attentive to the classroom environment and the teacher-student relationship. One student was particularly upset to find the Hispanic student she was tutoring to be in a desk facing the wall, isolated from the others. The class discussed ways she might approach the teacher and help her understand that the mandate to mainstream students to help them learn English was not being observed. This university student thought out the issue and in a calm and professional manner was able to work with the teacher and incorporate the Hispanic migrant student into the class circle.

All parties gain from the service-learning experience in the foreign language classroom. Twelve of the 23 students in the class signed up to study abroad in Mexico as a direct result of this experience. Institutional benefits include a higher rate of student retention, as students feel connected to the university and the community. Three of the students were considering transferring to another institution before the service-learning class. After their experiences they decided to stay, because, as they wrote in their evaluations, "It was the best experience

I've ever had at this university." "I feel a useful part of the community now." "I never knew there were neat opportunities like these available." The institution also benefits in that its image as a Community Partner is greatly enhanced as students are seen in a variety of settings volunteering to care for others.

The most direct benefit to the language learner is that the hesitancy to speak publicly in the target language is overcome, and once the fears about speaking a second language are dispelled, communication improves rapidly and students are motivated to continue practicing and studying. Roughly 30% of the students continue, in some form or another, to work with the migrant community on their own. The migrant children who have received tutoring help through the service-learning project have not only improved their grades but have also made a commitment to stay in school. Migrant families in the region now actively seek to participate in service-learning projects and have been instrumental in providing input for the development of an appropriate English as a Second Language Program in the school system. All the agencies involved in the service-learning project have now formed a community wide committee to address various regional needs such as more bilingual teachers. Service-learning in the foreign language classroom in theory and in practice enhances communication skills and serves to enhance the lives of all involved.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to the US Department of Education, the National Migrant Education Program registered over 610,000 official Hispanic migrant children in 1997. For every one child officially registered, there are anywhere from three to six unofficial Hispanic migrants, making the Hispanic population, particularly the Mexican-American migrant population, the fastest growing population in the United States according to Ed Flueren, State Migrant Program Director (Georgia).

<sup>2</sup> For the beginning Spanish sequence, there is a small-scale service-learning project in which students must spend a total of three hours in the Hispanic community. They may attend a Spanish Mass, interview a native speaker (the use of 'Spanglish' is allowed at the 101 level), or they can tutor a Hispanic migrant child (one who is relatively verbal in English) or they may attend two showings of Spanish films or attend two Spanish dances. Because for most students this is a required course (unlike the upper division courses), many resent this part of class. However, roughly, 60% agree that it is a very eye-opening and worthwhile experience.

<sup>3</sup> Visitors included doctors, writers, drug agents, and a variety of people, either Hispanic or Non-Hispanic, who use Spanish in their jobs. The classroom visitors helped Spanish minors and majors identify and clarify actual career options and establish contacts.

<sup>4</sup> Liability is an issue, and there is not much written regarding this topic. Students sign waivers, and all possible dangers are clearly explained, such as going to unlit neighborhoods after dark on the weekends. Students who work with schools

purchase a \$7.00 insurance policy specifically designed to cover anything that may happen to them while at the local schools. There are risks involved, but they are minimized, given that the benefits far outweigh the downfalls.

## References

- Badura, C. (1998). *Clio in the vineyard: Balancing tradition and innovation in the college history classroom*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Cohen, J., & Kinsey, D. (1994). "Doing good" and scholarship: A service-learning study. *Journalism Educator*, Winter, 4-14.
- Dewey, J. (1997). *Education and Experience* (5th ed.). New York: MacMillan.
- Kohlberg, L. (1981). *The meaning and measurement of moral development*. Portland: Clark University.
- Kraft, R. J., & Swadener, M. (1994). *Building community: Service-learning in the academic disciplines*. Boulder: Colorado Campus Compact.
- Markus, G. B., Howard, J. P., & Klug, D. C. (1993). Integrating community service and classroom instruction enhances learning: Results from an experiment. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 15 (4), 410-419.
- Maybach, C. W. (1996). Investigating community needs: Service-learning from a social justice perspective. *Education and Urban Society*. 28 (2), 224-236.
- Mintz, S. & Hesser, G. (1996). Principles of good practice in service-Learning. In Barbara Jacoby (Ed.), *Service-learning in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project. (1996). *Standards for foreign language learning: Preparing for the 21st century*. Lawrence, KS. Allen Press.
- Omaggio Hadley, A. (1993). *Teaching language in context* (2nd ed.). Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
- Tschirner, E. (1996). Scope and sequence: Rethinking beginning foreign language instruction. *Modern Language Journal* 80:1-14.
- Skidmore, T. & Smith, P. (1997). *Modern Latin America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Vadeboncouer, J. A., Rahm, I., Aguilera, D., & Le Compte, M. D. (1996). Building democratic character through community experiences in teacher education. *Education and Urban Society* 28 (2), 189-207.

## Appendix 1

(Permission to reprint this information was granted by the Migrant Education Program.)

### Cultural Characteristics of Mexican American Migrant Children

**Eye to Eye Contact.** Many Mexican American migrant children will not look at an adult straight in the eye when they are being addressed. This is a show of respect and does not mean they are being rebellious or are not paying attention.

**Affection.** Young Mexican American migrant children are shown a lot of affection at home. They are constantly being touched, kissed, loved even by strangers. They expect this when they come to school. When teachers do not do this, it is interpreted as a rejection.

**Isolation.** Mexican American migrant children need a lot of personal attention. When a child is given a workbook and told to work by himself/herself, he/she feels rejected. The teacher, whenever possible, should provide the child with personal attention. At the same time, Mexican American children should be helped to understand that their teachers behave the way they do, because they have different habits and not because they dislike them.

**Freedom of Choice.** Some Mexican American migrant children when told to choose what they want to do next will end up doing nothing. The teacher may interpret this as a lack of interest and motivation on the part of the student. In fact, what it actually reflects is the children's confusion or lack of knowledge about what to do, since they expect to receive very concrete and explicit instructions from adults. Mexican American migrant children are used to a lot of structure and direction in their activities and will tend to feel uncomfortable in situations in which they are given freedom of choice.

**Family.** A Mexican American migrant child is very closely linked to his/her family. Just as the individual is prized in North American culture, so is the family in Mexican American culture. The child's primary function is to help the family. Thus, an older child may be kept home from school to care for younger children, or if money is needed, the child may skip school and go to work. When the child goes to school the following day, the North American teacher does not feel the child's excuse is very good. The North American teacher feels the child's primary responsibility is to go to school, while the Mexican American migrant parents feel that the older child's primary responsibility is to help the family. To North Americans, school is an extension of the home; to Mexican American migrants, school is an entirely different entity.

**Family Honor.** Family honor to a Mexican American migrant child is extremely important. Many times a Mexican American child is referred to as *a García*, González, etc. rather than by his first name. If someone insults a member of his/her family, the Mexican American child is expected to defend the family honor by dealing with the offender and, if necessary, by fighting with him/her.

**Tone of Voice.** The tone of voice is sometimes very important. Many times Mexican American migrant children complain that Anglo American teachers "yell" too much. This could be attributed to the fact that in Latin American cultures, "yelling" is one of the most potent weapons available to a teacher. Consequently these children get upset when the teacher starts yelling without first using other techniques, such as asking them several times in a quiet tone of voice to please stop misbehaving.

**How Teachers are Perceived.** Mexican American migrant adults and children perceive teachers as important symbols of authority and sometimes are viewed with awe. Teachers are not to be treated as someone equal, but as someone much superior. This is somewhat different from the view of Americans who see teachers and students somewhat closer in status. In the Mexican American migrant culture one does not bother superiors with too many questions or initiate discussions or conversations.

**Repetition.** This factor is looked at differently by a North American teacher and a Mexican American migrant child who come from dissimilar cultures. When a Mexican American migrant child is having trouble with pronunciation in English, the North American teacher, believing that the child will succeed only if the Mexican American migrant child keeps on trying (North American cultural pattern), has the student repeat a word several times. The Mexican American migrant student, embarrassed by repeated exposure to his/her mistakes, develops a negative attitude toward the particular word and, by extension, toward the language and the teacher.

### *Post script*

Since the publication of my article, “*Service-learning and Foreign Language Acquisition: Working with the Migrant Community*,” in *Dimension* ‘99, awareness of the Hispanic and migrant communities has increased in this nation. As a result, there has been a growing need for services and for better delivery of them. The results of the 2000 census, the construction of a wall along the U.S. and Mexican border, and the 2010 “Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act” amendment in Arizona have amplified the need to integrate cultural competency into the academic curriculum. As the number of Hispanic residents and families increases, so does the demand for graduates of language programs in the fields of education, social services, and business. However, in “Getting to Know You? Latino-Anglo Social Contact,” authors Welch and Sigleman (2000) show that social interaction of Latinos with Anglo and African-American cultures is low. Without structured opportunities the majority of university students find it difficult to develop relationships with Latinos and specifically with Hispanic migrants. The same hold true for most Latinos and Hispanic Migrant families who have few opportunities to develop relationships with Anglos and African Americans. At Valdosta State University (VSU), after graduation most of our language majors work directly or indirectly with Hispanic migrant families either by teaching in school systems or working in a federal, local, or state agency. Students often remark that the SPAN 4980 service-learning class has been the cornerstone of their preparation for these jobs. Faculty have found service learning to be an essential part of our program because it sets up opportunities for direct interaction between the university and the community.

The SPAN 4980 service-learning course I wrote about in 1999 continues in full force with some modifications. The course requires that students spend 20-30 volunteer hours tutoring, interpreting, or working in some capacity to help the

migrant community. Students record their hours and write a journal entry in Spanish for every hour volunteered, and we have regular class meetings to discuss the experiences. Today, 12 years after starting the SPAN 4980 service-learning based course, we have seen the course evolve into an essential part of the degree in foreign language education, the endorsement in English as a Second Language (ESL), and for Spanish degrees with professional tracks. In addition, the practicum has linked with various offices and departments, including the Wiregrass College ESL program, Colleges of Social Work and Nursing, and the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice. The course has been given the Best Practices in Services Award from the University System of Georgia and a Georgia Humanities Humanitarian of the Year Award. The goals of the SPAN 4980 have evolved into real community solutions and continued relationships with our host families, students, and institutions. In maintaining these relationships with the community every year, service-learning has become a program that involves community leaders in frequent meetings. Last semester we were asked to help organize efforts to count Latinos in the 2010 census. In this way, service-learning has given birth to a strong sense of identity. We are amigos, and we know, support, and learn from each other.

Most language textbooks do not go into much detail regarding the causes of immigration and the problems the migrant community faces, and these issues generally are not covered in academic forums. However, over half of the majors at VSU work with the migrant community after graduation in some capacity. This reality has led to changes in the program of study such as an increased focus on cultural competency and a greater emphasis on making sure the students understand the connection between the practicum, the service learning, and their major and career choices.

Our original goal focused on developing linguistic proficiency in Spanish, but through an assessment of journal entries, community needs, and program evaluation, we discovered that students spend more time speaking English to help partners develop proficiency in English. As the data came in, it was clear our students were getting jobs with the community based on their ability to interact with and their knowledge about the Hispanic community. We learned that the ability to be bicultural was very important for local service providers. Service-learning is a strategy for success where students and partners complement and advocate for each other and develop comprehensive strategies, creative approaches, and innovative partnerships to help ensure well-being and academic achievement. In studying students' journals and evaluations, a clear sense of appreciation for and knowledge of the local migrant community was evident. Using the ACTFL program requirements as a tool to evaluate students, a new model of assessment was developed to include cultural competency. In turn, the cultural competency led to networking and career preparation. One student put it this way,

It certainly made it easier to speak with migrant communities because I think that it is always a little bit awkward at first to try to put yourself into another culture. ... My experiences with the migrant community were absolutely the reason I was able to get the job I have.

The shift to the development of cultural competency in service-learning has become a cornerstone of both the language program and teacher preparation program at VSU. We require students to read *Enrique's Journey* (Nazario, 2007) a true story about the difficult but very common odyssey of a Honduran boy who braves numerous hardships while riding the *train of death* to reach his mother in the United States. The depth of material presented in *Enrique's Journey* helps students understand how and why many Hispanics come to the United States.

Through service-learning students write and speak about what they learn, and community members share knowledge they gather from university students. Service-learning helps strengthen ties between communities, and it has the potential to provide access to information to individuals who move in social circles different from our own. This circulation of cultural ideas and dispelling of stereotypical myths can be attributed to the strength of weak ties, an idea promoted in the article *Outcomes for Community Partners in an Unmediated Service-Learning Program* (Ethel, 2003). During the 2005 school year, students enrolled in the practicum course completed a class project entitled *Becoming Visible*, based on the *Literacy through Photography Project* at Duke University. The project not only strengthened ties between the university and K-12 students but also with the local art center and the media center. In addition to helping tutor in math, English, and science, our Spanish students helped children learn to use cameras as a tool and visual images as a means of expressing identity. They also helped young students develop their writing skills by formulating narratives. In the process students from VSU learned about Hispanic culture, including close family ties, joy in the moment, extended family relationships, the importance of celebration and communion with friends and families, and pride in heritage and identity. We discovered that most of the children we were tutoring were spending two to three hours a day on the school bus, and this time in transit often made it hard to motivate them to sit down and study after school. The university students also saw that all cultures share many things in common: growing up, adolescence, riding the bus, music, sports, family ties, and wanting to fit in and be an individual. Local Hispanic children and their families helped VSU students improve their Spanish, enhance their tutoring skills, and develop their cultural competency. The project opening and display of works was attended by parents, administrators, teachers, students, and children; and there was discussion about how the students in the community, many undocumented, might be able to attend the university.

Over the years we have refined our definition of cultural proficiency as an understanding of the relationship among the practices, products, and perspectives of the culture studied. We now define cultural competence as the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific practices and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings (Davis, 1997; Herbert 2006). This specific model shows that to become more culturally competent, the individual should (1) value diversity, (2) have the capacity for cultural self-assessment, (3) be conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact, (4) continue to study and promote cultural knowledge, and eventually (5)



develop adaptations to service delivery reflecting an understanding of diversity between and within cultures. In the best case scenario only 10 % of university students ever interact with those of another culture in a study abroad or internship experience, and the average is slightly more than 1%; therefore, developing cultural competency at home and measuring it is difficult. We use a model that acknowledges that there is a process through which student pass, a development that occurs along a continuum from (1) cultural destructiveness, (2) cultural incapacity, (3) cultural blindness, (4) cultural pre-competence, (5) cultural competency, to (6) cultural proficiency (Davis, 1997).

At the beginning of the service-learning experience, most students assume a paternalistic posture toward migrant culture; some want to appear unbiased, but they still want to rescue and mainstream the Hispanic culture. Later students show an awareness of diversity within the Spanish-speaking world but still without much context and with very little direct experience. Class discussions and field work focus on learning strategies, cognitive development, the differences between primary and secondary learners and adult learners, and issues that arise with community partners, such as a lack of services or overwhelmed institutions. Students spend a lot of time working with their partners at school and or in the home. It is through service-learning that students are able to move toward cultural competence, first through initial language use and then by challenging their own assumptions and assessing themselves culturally. One student described the impact of the course.

[This course] was the single most life-changing ‘class’ in my college career. Having a degree in a language is much different than a degree in something like math. You cannot gain a language only on books and lectures; you must live it, and that is what this course did for me.

Although at first glance tutoring and socializing may seem less than rigorous in some academic circles, in fact, temporal, spatial, and relational values are key concepts in cross-cultural awareness. Reading about different perceptions regarding time, socializing, and family and experiencing these cultural phenomena are vastly different strategies. Students and community partners are in relationship with a diverse culture, making connections and comparisons within their respective cultures. They are given access to the hidden transcript of culture. Students experience the important position of family in Mexican culture, and they come to understand that being invited to a house means that a bond and trust have been established. Hispanic parents sometimes choose culturally dissimilar students as confidants, and they are able to inquire about the culture in south Georgia, the school culture, and other unique phenomena such as the pervasiveness of liberty, hair dye, body piercings, tattoos, dating, and other traits that teens in the U.S. exhibit. Migrant families learn about these cultural products, perspectives, and practices through social interaction. In a time of relative national paranoia,

the ability to work comfortably with those from diverse backgrounds, to communicate, and to circumlocute are valuable skills in the employment market.

Service-learning has not been immune to the shadow side of cross-cultural interactions. Perceptions of inequality can be reversed; in the migrant home initially it is the university student who is the outsider, but those feelings of discomfort and frustration are a definite part of becoming culturally competent. If the student understands through experience what the other culture feels on a daily basis, future service delivery will be improved. Students frequently make cultural assumptions related to productivity in their journal entries, with comments such as “I am not getting anything done” and “I am not doing enough to help Santos, am worried he’ll not pass.” However, the results show that the children improve in reading ability, retention, and homework completion. Students are fully aware of their dominant culture status and the benefits of being a legal citizen. Moreover, the media often stereotype Mexicans and migrants as gang members and dangerous. Students unlearn much of the culture of fear and distrust of public through expansion of their own mental maps of the community to include others. “I was nervous; I have never been in a Spanish only household,” is a typical response at the beginning of the service-learning course, but by the time they write the final entries, students have developed a comfort zone in which they feel a part of the family and of the territory in which the families move. There are Hispanic churches, *tortillerías* [tortilla bakery stores], Hispanic grocery stores, and hidden trailer parks.

The public school setting, while familiar to university students, is seen with new eyes. In discussion with teachers, they begin to understand the dilemma that teachers face when they are required to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) although many of their students do not understand English. As a result, students found that Hispanics have learned to read the questions in standardized tests and look for the answers without ever reading the text. VSU students observed socialization issues as Hispanic children are forced to miss physical education time to get academic help, thereby sacrificing crucial time to relax and de-stress at school and further isolating them from other children. Although VSU students find that migrant children in the class setting have seen at least a 10% improvement in overall grade quality after working with community partners, and sometimes as much as 200%, these findings are not the norm. More than half of Hispanic students do not graduate high school, and the need to go beyond service-learning and be agents of change is clear (Georgia KIDS Count Study, 2005).

Developing cultural competency through service-learning is one way to make a difference in the diverse neighborhoods that comprise Georgia and the U.S. Students graduate with cultural proficiency that strengthens local institutions and their delivery of goods. University students who are excited about working with the migrant community bring that excitement into the work place. The affirmative impact on future language instruction and area efforts to unite people is creating a stronger bond between the university and the community, which in turn benefits everyone.

## References

- Davis, K. (1997). *Exploring the intersection between cultural competency and managed behavioral health care policy: Implications for state and county mental health agencies*. Alexandria, VA: National Technical Assistance Center for State Mental Health Planning.
- Ethel, J. (2003). Outcomes for community partners in an unmediated service-learning program. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 10*, 5-33.
- Georgia KIDS Count Study. (2005). Retrieved November 4, 2005 from <http://www.gafcp.org/kidscount/>
- Herbert, B. (2006). Spanish health information resources for nurses. *Pediatric Nursing, 32*, 350-353.
- Nazario, S. (2007). *Enrique's journey*. New York: Random House.
- Welch, S., & Sigleman, L. (2000). Getting to know you? Latino-anglo social contact. *Social Science Quarterly, 81*, 67-83.