Examining the Value of a TESOL Service-Learning Study Abroad for U.S. Pre- and In-Service Teachers and Montenegrin Community Stakeholders

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Abstract

In response to the call to include experiential learning opportunities in our TESOL program and an invitation by a Montenegrin community to collaborate on the establishment of a summer English language institute, we designed and implemented a hybrid service-learning study abroad (SLSA) program which included two weeks spent in Montenegro in 2018 and 2019. This article examines the perceived value of this SLSA program for participating pre- and in-service TESOL teachers from a Midwestern university and EFL learners, educators, and families from the host community. Data from end-of-the program surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observation notes demonstrate an overwhelmingly positive impact on all participants, including program-initiated identity shifts in a number of stakeholders. The data also supports our call for a new, community-focused definition of SLSA that concludes this article.

TESOL Teacher education has increasingly incorporated experiential learning into its curriculum. Reliance on microteaching demonstrations involving peers pretending to be English learners have long been complemented, if not completely replaced, by more authentic teaching formats in most TESOL programs. In the literature review that follows, we highlight two high-impact experiential learning practices—study abroad (SA) and service-learning (SL)—that have been increasingly integrated in TESOL teacher education. We make a case for combining these practices when designing programs to maximize benefits for TESOL teacher candidates and participating community stakeholders.

Literature Review

Study Abroad in Teacher Education and TESOL

A common rationale in support of SA is that it offers the ultimate experiential learning opportunity for students to engage intensively with course content while immersed in an environment with which they typically have little familiarity, thus navigating "otherness" on cultural, linguistic, or ethnic grounds. For future and practicing teachers such disorientation is seen as an invaluable formative experience (e.g. Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). After all, the very nature of successful teaching depends on teachers' ability to understand the realities of a diverse student body, negotiate ambiguity, and adapt to the unexpected.

Scholarship also suggests that the participation in a SA program positively contributes to teacher candidates' professional and personal growth, including increased confidence (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008), empathy for learners (Kasun & Saavedra, 2016), expanded intercultural competence (He, Lundgren, & Pynes, 2017; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Phillion, Malewski, Sharma, & Wang, 2009; Smolcic & Katunich, 2017; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011), and improved understanding of content (Vatalaro, Szente, & Levin, 2015).

While some express skepticism over the effectiveness of short-term SA programs, recent studies demonstrate that well-designed short-term SA programs can help participants develop global competencies and other aforementioned capacities (Lewis & Nissenbaum 2005; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner 2014). Key to such programs, is the incorporation of service-learning, which can increase the meaningfulness of short-term SA programs (Parker & Altman Dautoff, 2007; Roberts, 2003).

The Role of Service Learning in Designing TESOL Study Abroad Programs

Service learning, which has long been considered a "high impact practice" in the U.S. tertiary settings, centers on the concept of reciprocity between two sets of participants, typically university students and community stakeholders. In the context of TESOL, community stakeholders are typically English learners, or organizations providing various educational social services to diverse populations. Beyond reciprocity, effective SL programs are built on an authentic need, which, when engaged effectively, provide the opportunity for growth for all involved. For pre- and in-service teachers such growth includes increased appreciation of diversity, enhanced sociocultural awareness, deepened knowledge of concepts, improved communication confidence, enriched professional development opportunities, and heightened commitment to civic engagement (Cho & Adams, 2018; Lindahl, Tomaš, Farrelly & Krulatz, 2018; Moore, 2013, Perren & Wurr, 2015; Rueckert, 2013; Tomaš, Morger, Specht & Park, 2017; Uzum, Petrón, & Berg, 2014).

In the specific context of SA, Bringle and Hatcher (2011) propose the framing of SL as:

a structured academic experience in another country in which the students (a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs; (b) learn from the direct interaction and cross-cultural dialogue with others; and (c) reflect on the experience in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a deeper understanding of global and intercultural issues, a broader appreciation of the host country and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, locally and globally (p. 19).

While several published accounts reporting on the SA experiences of pre-service teachers appear to include a "service" component, it is often not clear which programs qualify SL where reciprocity has been carefully considered during program design. Roberts' (2003) SLSA study focused specifically on 30 TESOL pre- and in-service teachers traveling to Costa Rica found in participants' "an increased confidence in their teaching ability, increased self-knowledge after taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions are challenged, and an increased interest in working in multicultural

settings in the United States" (p. 265). What Roberts primarily attributes this positive impact to is a "balance of experiential learning and serious interaction in an international arena" (p. 272). Similarly, Blum (2015) described a 2008 SLSA program in Mexico which engaged 10 Californian teachers in providing free English instruction, reporting that the SL component, coupled with the integration of Critical Race Theory, allowed the teachers to engage in thinking deeply about power relations in both the local community and society at large. Assaf, Lussier, Furness, & Hoff (2019) explored the impact of a month-long SLSA program in South Africa during which pre-service teachers learned to wrestle with previous assumptions of the communities in which they serve, thus better preparing them for the increasing "ethnically, culturally, and linguistically, diverse K-12 population in the United States" (p. 105).

While the existing work provides a convincing argument for the positive impact of SLSA programs on pre-service (and occasionally in-service) teachers, our research explores—with equal rigor—the impact on community stakeholders. This is in response to the call of Larsen (2016) and others who point to the scarcity of research in this area and who advocate for more work beyond the success of the university participants from wealthy countries and that "legitimiz[es] and privileg[es], the experiences, values, and voices" of the community members in host countries (Larsen, 2016, p. 4).

Montenegrin SLSA Program Design

Decisions about the design of the SLSA program in Montenegro were informed by the existing scholarship on SA and SL, the needs of the K-12 teachers enrolled in the MA TESOL curriculum, and the needs, and assets of the Montenegrin community, specifically the Marco Nuculovic elementary school in Dolny Shtoj. The school is home to about 80-90 children each year and has a teaching staff of 22.

On the U.S. side, the SLSA coursework was designed as hybrid. The month before departure, pre- and in-service teachers completed an online module with specific assignments and an initial reflection around the topics of oral language pedagogy and cultural issues in teaching English. For the MA TESOL students this corresponded with two graduate-level classes required as part of the SLSA. Pre-service teachers, including some who came from other university disciplines, enrolled in one undergraduate culture-focused course. Prior to the departure to Montenegro, the university participants also attended a six-hour campus-based meeting focused on content clarifications, information about Montenegrin learners, and collaborative lesson planning with co-teachers.

In Montenegro, the design consisted of pre- and in-service teachers delivering English language instruction in the mornings, followed by guided reflective and lesson planning sessions in the afternoons. They also engaged in three professional development seminars focused on how the theoretical concepts from their coursework connected to the specific Montenegrin context. Local English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers were invited to engage with the American pre- and in-service teachers, providing meaningful pedagogical and cultural insights.

What helped ensure that the needs and strengths of *all* were carefully considered, was a shared directorship of the SLSA program by the leading U.S. university professor and a Montenegrin EFL teacher from the school who is an alumna of our university's MA TESOL program. This collaboration assured that the "service" offered *to* the community, such as a free summer English language classes for local residents and professional development workshops for EFL teachers, was something the community saw as valuable. Equally important to us was that the "service" offered *by* the community, specifically opportunities for the pre- and in-service teachers to practice teaching oral language, learn about cultural issues that affect teaching, and observe the unique traits of a multilingual region, was something the community wanted to provide.

Our commitment to true reciprocity was the cornerstone of the SLSA design. In part, it was facilitated by the intensive involvement of the local teacher/program co-director who had strong support from her principal. It was further achieved because of the community's ability to build capacity in creative ways and with unexpected resources. To illustrate, following the successful implementation of the program in year 1, the English Language Teaching Association of Montenegro (ELTAM) offered to collaborate in year 2. This involved tying the SLSA program to the ELTAM annual conference. The collaboration with ELTAM also resulted in some of the U.S. participants assisting in the U.S. State Department's English Access Micro Scholarship Program summer camp that brings together Montenegrin teens from socially disadvantaged families.

Finally, the community stakeholders' increased sense of control over the program in year 2 led two teachers, one pre-service teacher, and five local high schoolers to get involved in the program more intensively. In addition to contributing to the professional development, the three Montenegrin in- and pre-service teachers assisted with lessons and helped the American participants reflect on their work with the Montenegrin EFL learners. Five local high school students, who were students in the institute the year before, acted as assistants and attended the professional development sessions.

The American pre- and in-service teachers' participation at the ELTAM conference and in the U.S. Embassy sponsored Access camp, as well as the involvement of the varied Montenegrin stakeholders, all contributed to an interdependent nature of the SLSA program, especially in its second year. Incorporating various community stakeholders' voices, hence valuing local knowledge prior to and throughout the whole program, helped us to avoid an impression that "American experts" were coming to a local community to impose their expertise on the local context (Easterly, 2014). Instead, we were able to frame the program as a partnership between two sets of participants coming together to learn from one another, thus cultivating "relations based on principles such as interdependence, reciprocity, solidarity, and mutuality" (Larsen, 2016, p. 4).

Method

Research Question

The dual focus on both the pre- and in-service American teachers and the community stakeholders guided the development of our research question: What are the participating pre- and in-service teachers' and community stakeholders' perceptions of the value of the SLSA program?

Participants

U.S.-based participants. Seventeen U.S.-based participants took part in the SLSA program in year 1 and 13 in year 2. Of the 13 in year 2, two participants chose to return for a second time. Of the 28 total U.S.-based participants, nine were undergraduate and 19 graduate students. Of the nine undergraduate students, seven were pre-service teachers although not all had prior coursework in TESOL. Of the 19 graduate students, all were in-service teachers (18 in the United States and one in Montenegro.) The seven undergraduates (26.9%) had no or little formal teaching experience prior to the SLSA. Of the in-service teachers who were enrolled in the graduate TESOL program, seven (26.9%) taught between 1-5 years, four between 6-10 years (15.4%), and eight for 11 (30.8%) or more years. Seventeen participants (65.4%) had little to no longer-term travel experience. Of the 28 participants, 26, who were pre- and in-service teachers were invited to participate in the anonymous end-of-the program evaluation survey. Nine agreed to being interviewed one year after the program to reflect on the long-term effects of their participation.

Montenegrin participants. In year 1, 118 and in year 2, 95 Montenegrin English learners participated in the SLSA designed English language institute. Most participants were K-9 learners.

Seventeen adults, most of whom were parents of the children enrolled, also took part in the two-week intensive institute. Because many students repeated the program, the total number of English learners served across two years was 140. About half of the participants came from the host school and half from two other local elementary schools. The lower number of participants in year 2 was due to a loss of one classroom to a computer lab. The total number of 107 learners responded to the end-of-the institute anonymous survey in Year 1 and 87 in year 2.

Twelve local EFL teachers also participated. In 2018 eight teachers and in 2019 nine local teachers attended professional development sessions offered. Of the nine teachers who attended the second year, eight were "returnees" attesting to the fact that they found this professional development valuable. Finally, of these teachers, two teachers and one pre-service teacher also chose to support the classroom instruction during Year 2 of the program. The principal and other school staff also actively engaged throughout the two weeks.

Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative framework for analyzing and organizing data in this research was thematic analysis (TA) in which the aim is to "identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for the TA data analysis and interpretation process. We first became familiar with the relevant data, which included repeated readings of the selected excerpts from course reflections and observation notes, as well as transcripts from:

- Open-ended items from the anonymous end-of-the-program survey with 26 U.S.-based participants
- Open-ended items from a translated, anonymous end-of-the program survey of 140 Montenegrin English learners
- Semi-structured interviews with nine U.S. pre- and in-service teachers
- Semi-structured interview with the school principal
- Focus group interview with one Montenegrin pre-service and one in-service teacher
- Focus group interview with five Montenegrin high school teaching assistants

Two of the researchers, both of whom participated in the SLSA program during the two years, then generated codes and searched for themes, assigning initial codes to any relevant data. We met to review the codes, then identified themes and subthemes, reconciled our interpretations, and defined our final themes. Throughout this process, we distinguished three main, "larger" themes that were relevant to both the lived experience of the American *and* Montenegrin participants. For the purpose of this article, we decided not to include two additional themes that emerged around specific pedagogical knowledge development that pertained solely to the participating American pre- and in-service teachers. The third author of the study who had both the perspective of an MA TESOL pre-service teacher (Year 1) and the school-based teacher (Year 2, and prior to her MA TESOL studies) conducted a member-check on our interpretations.

Findings

Perceived value of the SLSA program in in- and pre-service U.S. teachers' and the Montenegrin stakeholders' survey data

The learning outcomes for the 26 American pre- and in-service teachers were comparable with those attained by peers in the campus-based version of the courses with no difference between groups in unit project and lesson plan scores or course grades. In their self-assessment of attaining

methods course objectives, 11 respondents (42%) reported "exceeding", 12 (46%) "attaining", and 3 (12%) "partially attaining" the objectives. In their self-assessment of attaining the culture course objectives, 11 respondents (42%) reported exceeding, 14 (54%) attaining, and 1 (4%) partially attaining the objectives. In terms of the overall professional growth, 16 (62%) of the 26 pre- and in-service teachers evaluated the program as "very effective" and 10 (38%) as "effective." Twenty-five (94%) respondents said they would recommend the program to others and 1 (4%) was not sure. Beyond their self-perceived value of the SLSA program, many elaborated on ways in which they deepened their understanding of course concepts such as pronunciation-focused language objectives, formative assessment of verbal responses, project-based learning, differentiation strategies, etc.

Similarly, of the 118 English learners (out of whom 107 took the final survey) in year 1 and 95 (out of whom 87 took the final survey) participating learners in year 2, an overwhelming majority rated the program as effective or highly effective in terms of English language improvement (103, 92.3% in year 1 and 84, 96.6% in year 2). Students also claimed to have more positive views of English as a result of the program (87, 81.3% in year 1 and 79, (90.8% in year 2). An overwhelming majority of students said that they would want to return the following year or would recommend the program to friends (106, 99.1% in year 1 and 81, 93.1% in year 2).

In regard to the pedagogical activities throughout the institute, 69 out of 71 (97.2%) surveyed students in year 1 and 53 of the 53 (100%) of the surveyed students in year 2 rated the activities as very effective or effective. Similarly, students evaluated their final projects positively—83.3% of students in year 1 and 91.7% of students in year two chose the option "I really liked the project." The most echoed suggestion for improvement was that the program be longer!

Shifting from expanding learning opportunities to transforming professional identities in qualitative data

We were pleased with the aforementioned satisfaction and effectiveness ratings among all participants throughout the two years of the SLSA. As we engaged more deeply in the research process and triangulated the survey data with transcribed interviews and focus groups, as well as data from field notes and reflections, it became evident that the program participants were getting more out of the experience than what we had initially imagined. Specifically, the themes we identified appeared to go beyond general reports of effectiveness in terms of attaining course objectives. It also surpassed the Montenegrin participants' expectations to practice English (learners) and be exposed to new pedagogical approaches (teachers). Rather, the SLSA appeared to catalyze identity shifts in many of the participants. Three such shifts are described in what follows.

From a "teacher of English learners" to a "TESOL professional". Prior to the program, the U.S.-based pre- and in-service teachers appeared to view their professional identities strictly through the lens of preparing to serve specific EL populations in the K-12 context in the U.S. Of all the participating teachers, three had limited experience teaching in the EFL context, but had not considered their professional identity as spanning beyond the K-12 setting. The first-hand experience of engaging with "otherness" and adapting personally and professionally to the Montenegrin context, interacting with other EFL teachers and teaching assistants, working together on producing conference proposals (year 1) and participating at the ELTAM International Conference (year 2), all allowed the U.S.-based participants to expand their identity from that of "serving ELs in the U.S." to that of being much more well-rounded TESOL professionals.

Undoubtedly the program led to the biggest shift in the area of professional identity expansion for those pre- and in-service teachers who had no to little experience being in a minority position. For

the first time, these professionals were "the other" challenged by negotiating an unfamiliar linguistic and cultural space. First, they gained authentic knowledge of what it is like to adapt as newcomers and second, they had to adapt their instruction to a group of learners with whom they had no experience working. For many in-service teachers, this had a profound effect, especially in their interactions with newcomers in their K-12 classrooms in the U.S. One teacher, interviewed a year after the program, stated: "If you are teaching students who have come [to the U.S.] with very little English, you need to have that EFL experience of going into a culture that is very different than the American culture, because you need to be able to adapt and to create an environment that the student feels safe in order to learn. And we had to do that ourselves in Montenegro." Another explained: "Sometimes I forget with my students how hard learning another language can be and it's good to be reminded of that and what it feels like to be in another country where you don't speak the language…" Several other teachers reflected that they had "a deeper appreciation" for English learners, newcomers, and the whole learning process.

In addition to expanding their adaptability skills, the participating pre- and in-service teachers broadened their "TESOL worldview," a finding echoed in the Stachowski and Mahan's (1998) study. One teacher commented: "It's a good experience for teachers to see how other education systems work." She said that the immersion experience gave her "a lot more confidence to be able to advocate in the TESOL profession. When people say this isn't going to work or that's not going to work, I can say well it does work, it worked in Montenegro, we did it there." The expanded worldview also resulted from the examination of Global Englishes which was a component of the TESOL imbedded coursework. Directly engaging with the outer circle English language users (Kachru, 1985) and learning about how critical competence in English is for Montenegrins, made the U.S.-based participants feel a new appreciation for EFL colleagues whose job is to teach English in non-immersed settings. It further increased their commitment to include a wider variety of Englishes in their own U.S. K-12 classrooms to help expand American students' awareness of English use around the world. After her experience at the Access camp, one teacher wrote in her reflection:

This experience made me realize that teachers around the world often face the same struggles – whether it's controlling a room full of excited teenagers to ever-changing curriculum standards. What I had not thought of however, is how difficult it is for Montenegrin teachers to get a full-time teaching position. I was also shocked to hear that basic office supplies are well, not very basic in Montenegro. One teacher was so excited when I left her my sticky notes!

Many other U.S. participants gained a whole new appreciation for their EFL colleagues due to the considerably slower Internet speed—something that was a source of their personal and professional frustration.

Along with the increased appreciation for the professional challenges of their international peers, many participating in-service teachers developed a genuine interest in other course-inspired topics and have since contributed to the scholarship of the TESOL profession. Three teachers created a pedagogical project focused on the incorporation of World Englishes into instruction. One teacher, who returned to Montenegro for year 2, chose to present on this topic at the ELTAM conference. In fact, following the SLSA, there was a significant increase in the number of in-service teachers enrolled in our MA TESOL program who presented at state-level and international conferences or wrote articles in newsletters for educators. U.S.-based teachers who attended the second year of the Montenegro SLSA program had an opportunity to present at (6) or attend (5) at ELTAM—the first international conference for English teachers in Montenegro. The professional opportunities that resulted from participation in the SLSA are all a testament to an increasing sense of belonging to

the TESOL field and a broadening of their identities to include collaborating with colleagues in the EFL context.

An increased interest in pursuing additional EFL experiences further demonstrates the broadening of the U.S. pre- and in-service teacher identities. Four participants from the first-year program returned to Montenegro the second and third year to participate in an Access camp—an EFL internship program, and three participants from the second year have contacted the Study Abroad professor to inquire about participating in the program the following year. One Michigan-based K-12 in-service teacher from year 1 has since changed professional tracks and accepted a teaching position in the Middle East. In her written reflection, she shared:

I was captivated by this experience and immersed myself deeper into the TESOL community to explore all the professional possibilities it offered. I took a huge step in my professional career… I am excited about how else I will choose to expand my career path!

Several others have expressed interest in EFL opportunities, such as exploring other short-term summer programs or teaching abroad after retirement. One K-12 teacher has begun to teach EFL online to continue to expand her professional profile. Finally, one pre-service teacher decided to change from a TESOL minor to a full TESOL academic major. She explained: "I now think of myself as able to teach anywhere, not just in the United States. This program opened doors to so many new relationships and exciting professional opportunities."

One final identify shift in the observed in-service teachers, both American and Montenegrin, was one toward the mentorship role. Several of the twelve Montenegrin teachers who engaged in the professional development sessions expressed surprise and reported feeling proud when American teachers made positive comments about their EFL students' proficiency. This led the EFL teachers to openly share their cultural and pedagogical insights with the American teachers. This new, coaching/mentorship role ran counter to the Montenegrin teachers' initial expectations for the offered professional development—that they would "receive up-to-date information on methods" and "pick up tips and tricks from the American teachers" while "listening to American English because [they] were more familiar with the British English." The American in-service teachers who collaborated with undergraduate, pre-service teachers also engaged in mentorship, with some continuing to support their partners beyond the program through writing letters of recommendation to help their mentees secure employment.

From EFL learners to English users, autonomous learners, and youth (language) liaisons. What unanimously struck all involved pre- and in-service teachers across both years of the SLSA was the level of EFL learners' engagement in the day-to-day lessons and program as a whole. The American teachers in particular, were taken aback by how eagerly the learners participated in class activities and how emotional many of them were at the end of the institute. Many students surveyed reported that they found the individual lessons engaging and/or creative. Several of the teachers implemented a project-based approach, which many students said was their favorite part.

While we were pleased to see highly engaged EFL learners, interviews with the principal, assistants, teachers, as well as conversations with parents, suggested that many students were beginning to see themselves as English *users* rather than English *learners*. For the first time, most of these learners used English as a medium of instruction and communication rather than the object of study. Also new was the authentic communicative need; the American teachers did not understand the students' home languages, so the students could not rely on their L1 to talk to teachers. The school's principal related a story that demonstrates the shift from learning to using English, shared by a parent who, reportedly, found her child playing with another Montenegrin child—in English! Another parent

shared that upon asking her child a question (in Montenegrin) at the parent pick-up, the child answered in English, saying, "It's hard for me to explain in Montenegrin, can I tell you in English?"

A few additional examples illustrate shifts in participating EFL learners' identities as competent language users with a newfound personal agency to autonomously extend their learning. Acting out of a sense of personal empowerment, one such student decided to create her own community project focused on affirmation messages, following the Kindness Rock project example she had experienced in the program. Another inspired student offered to make a video to share with everyone as a keepsake. He expressed his long-term hope to go into a media field and that the project allowed him to practice and showcase these skills. This student and his peer brought the Kindness Rock project to their own high school the following academic year—they were able to organize the staff and students at their home school to recreate a kindness rock garden during their annual anti-discrimination event.

Arguably, the most significant identity shift was that in the five selected high school Montenegrin teaching assistants who, for the first time in their lives, were starting to see themselves not just as language learners and users, but as youth liaisons. All five high school students eagerly accepted our invitation to participate in the capacity of teaching assistants in year 2 because they "aged out" of being able to attend as learners. When asked why they wanted to participate, they responded that they saw it as an opportunity to use and improve their English, but also to help "improve this program, help with kids."

Despite some initial skepticism about their new roles, all five students evaluated the program and their own participation with great enthusiasm. In the words of one: "This year we had our moments… When going into this I didn't know what kind of role it really was, but the teachers, they didn't take all the work for themselves, we were allowed to help, they shared everything with us." Another stated: "This year it has really changed a lot because I am a teaching assistant. Now I get to communicate with the teachers more, about the program, things we're gonna do in class, so that in those two weeks we can accomplish everything we wanna do, we were involved in this a lot." They also enjoyed that the learners in the program referred to them as "teacher + first name"; this made them feel valued, a status that they had not held as students.

The focus group interview and other informal conversations with the teaching assistants revealed that they were thinking deeply about teaching and their roles as peer mentors. They made thoughtful comments about a variety of effective pedagogical concepts, including various scaffolding techniques the teachers used such as sentence stems and written agendas, as well as paying careful attention to students' nonverbal clues to assess comprehension. Two also reported becoming much more intentional about their own communication given the learners' expectations that they too are English language models. This increased awareness also brought up insights about the delicate balance between a teacher's desire to share thoughts with learners and knowing when to step back and let learners share. As one teaching assistant put it: "I wanted to speak for myself, but [as an assistant] I had to let it go and hear others. It was a really great practice in patience". Above all, three of the five teaching assistants who were aspiring to become teachers valued the experience in that it gave them a first-row seat to the 'behind the scenes' of English language teaching. As one explained: "I sort of saw what the teachers' life is like. It's really challenging to learn new stuff and come up with new stuff and games, and be interesting to your students, motivating…"

In line with our careful thinking about reciprocity, we were pleased to find out that the teaching assistants thought not of their roles through the lens of growing or receiving service, but as being able to *provide* service. All five felt that they contributed to the success of the SLSA program, with one explaining: "we helped with the kids, because we know how they are thinking, Albanian and

Montenegrin people, we are them so we know." Another recollected a classroom episode where the American teachers made an assumption that the students understood what they were saying but this was not the case: "I told [the teachers] that they did not really understand, but they are shy." The teaching assistants' growing confidence as empowered student leaders culminated in their end-of-the program suggestions about further program improvements. They requested additional opportunities to engage further with the American teachers and "work together on a project," explaining "we have other ideas, our own ideas that we can share with the teachers!"

From a small school identity to identity of success. The SLSA unexpectedly afforded the school an unprecedented amount of resources and visibility. Somehow, the fact that a large group of American professionals was coming to the small school in a small town, captured the imagination of local policy makers and business owners, with the Montenegro Ministry of Education representatives referring to the program as "one of a kind in the whole country". Because of the U.S. participants' arrival, funds to cover the cost of projectors and AC units that had been requested in vain prior to this program unexpectedly became available. An article in a local professional magazine for educators, as well as reports by local and national TV and radio stations, further promoted the program. This fostered pride in the local families and children attending the school, and encouraged families and teachers from bigger towns to inquire about participation. The positive media messaging resulted in administrative meetings with the mayor, the president of ELTAM, and the attendance of the final celebration by representatives of local political offices and the U.S. Embassy.

Thanks, in large part, to the successful implementation of this SLSA program, the school received an award from the Ministry of Education of Montenegro as one of the most successful schools in Montenegro in 2018-2019. Following the second year of the program, the school was also visited by regional Peace Corps representatives, which resulted in an invitation of Marko Nuculovic school—as one of the few (and first!) schools in Montenegro—to apply for Peace Corps volunteers. This application has recently been granted and the school will begin hosting Peace Corps volunteers starting in 2020. A teacher from Marco Nuculovic who acted as a co-director of the SLSA program was offered a position as a Language and Culture Consultant to coordinate Peace Corps volunteers in the region, thus furthering the school's prestige. The principal stated that without doubt, the SLSA program played a major role in this selection as it helped demonstrate that this is "an active and open school."

One school administrator commented that the SLSA resulted in decreased concerns over losing students to bigger schools because the program showed local families that "good things are happening at our school." He added that repeating the institute the second year "created a public opinion that this school works hard and makes an effort toward improving and advancing education." In the words of another administrator, the program fostered a new "identity of success" at the school. While she admitted that it could be a coincidence, following the first year of the program, the school of just 90 students won third place in the international Balkan championships in coding organized by the British Council. Similarly, she pointed to an increased number of medals won by students at various athletic competitions in the country and abroad. While some of the unexpected successes by students and staff may only in part be attributed to the SLSA, it is undeniable that the school benefited from this collaboration in many ways that allowed it to communicate to the community a story of success and vitality.

Conclusion

This SLSA program may have begun as an experiment in international collaboration between one university and one school, but it resulted in a much more impactful partnership. Given the reported

positive areas of individual and collective growth, we hope that other TESOL teacher education institutions will consider developing similar SLSA programs to satisfy the curricular, personal, and professional needs of their student body, while connecting to other global communities in ways that enrich the experiences of all involved. Indeed, a thoughtful, critical integration of SL into SA program designs can help "avoid creat[ing] ghettos in which participants avoid interacting with the local culture and develop ethnocentric attitudes" (Boyer, 1994, p. 48) and lead to many additional benefits to participating pre- and in-service teachers. And when done effectively, such collaborations can also disrupt the implicit "service" assumptions wherein the western participants enact the roles of benevolent do-gooders, with community stakeholders restricted to needs-oriented recipient roles. With this parting thought, we conclude this article with our own definition of SLSA, one that reflects the principles of critical service learning (e.g., Mitchell, 2008) by foregrounding the capacity and role of the local community in which SLSA programs may take place:

SLSA is a meaningful, reciprocal, structured international experience that expands the assets of both university and community-based participants and cultivates agency among collaborating partners. In such partnerships, both sets of participants work together to leverage resources and engage in developing, sharing, and critically reflecting on personal, academic, and/or professional experiences. This helps to expand participants' awareness of intercultural and social justice issues which, in turn, fosters a shared communal yet global mindset. The main purpose of SLSA is to help create authentic, synergistic spaces wherein program goals are collectively pursued in ways that honor and privilege the host community while contributing to the growth of all involved.

Only this kind of foregrounding of *community* in an SLSA definition can, we believe, increase investment and build capacity, which is critical for the successful implementation, improvement, and continuation of SLSA programs.

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