

Advanced Spanish Conversation and the Non-Traditional Student: A Case Study for Implementing Community-Based Learning at the Urban University

Graham Stefan Ignizio

Metropolitan State University of Denver

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the unique situation of teaching an upper-level, undergraduate Spanish conversation course with a service-learning component at a large, public, urban university. With the help of service-learning literature and anonymous pre- and post-surveys, this study aims to offer some qualitative observations and advice on community-based learning for the non-traditional student. Even with the added effort in curriculum development and the imperfections of language instruction for non-traditional students, this article concludes that the implementation of service learning at the urban university can be a successful experience.

Keywords: service-learning, language instruction, curriculum development, service-learning course designation

Over the last few decades, community-based learning for language acquisition at the university level has grown rapidly across the United States, Canada, and Europe (Hellebrandt & Jorge, 2013). This pedagogical approach has proved to be successful in offering students a more global understanding of traditional classroom subjects, service, leadership, and community sensitivity, but it is not without its own limitations and defects (Hellebrandt & Jorge, 2013). Throughout this case study, I will adhere to Aileen Hale's (1999) definition of service learning as the "union of public-community service with structured and intentional learning" (12). As universities continue to develop service-learning programs, introduce community-based learning components into their classes, and strive for classifications such as the Carnegie Community Engagement, it is essential that educators and the administration comprehend both the strengths and weaknesses of this relatively new addition to the university classroom (Carnegie Foundation, 2018). Inexperience and naivety by faculty mem-

bers can lead to negative consequences and an undermining of the fundamental purpose of service learning when implementing community-based learning in higher education (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). However, when faculty members take a critical approach to curriculum development and design, I suggest that community-based learning, along with traditional pedagogies, can result in positive student learning outcomes, such as civic responsibilities and community awareness.

In this exploratory article, the aim is to share my personal experience of developing and implementing a community-based learning component in an advanced Spanish conversation course (SPA 3110SL) at Metropolitan State University of Denver, a public, urban university in downtown Denver, Colorado. As an associate professor of Spanish in the Department of Modern Languages (MDL) and the faculty associate (faculty advisor) for service learning, I am part of MSU Denver's push to promote the importance of community engagement and expanding collaborations with community

partners. One of the most notable results of this strategic plan is the creation of our service-learning designation (SL), which appears in the university's course catalog and on students' transcripts. In what follows, I dive into a brief literature review and discussion of the non-traditional student and how there is a lack of service-learning literature focusing on this type of student. I continue with how I designed and taught my Spanish conversation class and examine non-traditional students' experiences with their community partners via anonymous pre- and post-surveys. Finally, I consider the outcomes and results, such as civic responsibility and civic awareness, from my class of 20 students and offer some recommendations and conclusions based on what I have learned. Due to the size and format of this case study, I am limited in some aspects, such as the length of my literature review and the discussion of methods. This exploration aims to deliver brief but compelling insights about and initiate a discussion around the issue of community-based course design for non-traditional students. Future research endeavors would include comparing experiences and reactions from non-traditional and traditional students within the same class or within two different sections of the same course.

SERVICE LEARNING AND THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

Research on service learning for the "non-traditional student" is still emerging and somewhat unpredictable (Largent, 2013). The few authors writing on community-based learning, particularly in service-learning Spanish classes with heritage learners/speakers, tend to define non-traditional students within a more ethnic or racial framework. For example, Lisa Amor Petrov's (2013) examination of piloting service learning in a Spanish heritage speaker course in Chicago recognizes that race and ethnicity play a fundamental role in how students participate in community engagement. She affirms that, "Latino students ex-

perience service-learning differently than those who, as foreign language students, go into neighborhoods to serve populations more significantly removed from their own lived experiences, cultures, and identities" (310). However, Liz Largent writes about employing service learning with non-traditional students at the community college, focusing mainly on age. Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2002), Largent defines a non-traditional age student as "a student age 22 or older" and suggests that service-learning programs can meet the needs of non-traditional age students, countering what some critics, such as Dan Butin (2006) have argued (297). Although acknowledging that studies have found that non-traditional age students need more flexibility, meaningful partnerships, opportunities for application of material, and tend to juggle other priorities while studying (marriage, children, part-time work, etc.), Largent maintains that findings on service learning among non-traditional age students are limited at best (Knowles, 1989; Taniguchi & Kafman, 2005) and, based on her analysis, she concludes that service learning can provide a fulfilling and positive educational impact on non-traditional age students, especially when faculty members implement post-reflective assignments and offer resources on the service agencies prior to the service experience (310). Other scholars, such as Jennifer Leeman, Lisa Rabin, and Esperanza Román-Mendoza (2011), handle the ambiguous definition of the non-traditional student by comparing and contrasting it with the traditional student, who is "schooled and socialized in more traditional hierarchical faculty-student relationships" (307). In other words, the non-traditional student might be unaware of the particular power hierarchies that exist in higher-education institutions and must quickly learn how to negotiate these social structures, i.e., professor-student interactions or navigating on-campus resources like the Financial Aid Office.

As a large, urban university located in downtown Denver, our institution boasts a student demographic that is unique and exceptionally diverse. The ethnic diversity of students is at 42%, with Latino/Hispanics at 26.4%. There are many first-generation students, part-time students with full-time jobs, veterans, and students who are married with children. Furthermore, their average age is 25 years. In many ways, our students exemplify not one single definition of the non-traditional student, but combinations of the definitions mentioned above. Moreover, over 30% of our students are PELL Grant eligible, denoting diversity in their socioeconomic class as well.

In the case of MSU Denver, there has been a considerable desire to form significant, long-lasting relationships in the Denver metropolitan area. MSU Denver's 2020 Strategic Plan emphasizes community engagement and expanding collaborations with community partners, stating that the institution will be successful when "we apply the intellectual strength of our faculty and the energy of our students to solve real-life problems" and that "[w]e have the ability to benefit the economic health, cultural health, and well-being of the community and promote the public good through the transformation of urban communities in metropolitan Denver" (3). One of the ways MSU Denver is fulfilling its goal in creating community partners is by the initiation of the new service-learning designation (SL) for courses across campus. The designation sets forth a unified and cohesive manner in which administration can track and record its progress concerning community partners and university-community relations. The designation uses the letters "SL" and attaches them to the course numbers of approved classes, such as SPA 3110SL. In addition, the institution is currently focused on encouraging community partners to participate on campus by hosting round-table discussions at undergraduate research conferences and implementing community partner surveys, ultimately

striving to create long-term collaborations with local organizations.

In their book entitled *Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning*, Randy Stoecker and Elizabeth Tryon (2009) advocate for a truly mutually beneficial relationship between communities and institutions that offers service-learning opportunities. Posing questions such as "Who is served by service learning?," Stoecker and Tryon highlight the lack of communication between communities and institutions and the negative effects it can have on both parties (5). The unheard community organization voices are vital when seeking out community partners, and as the authors note, "we must listen to them first" before we can accurately assess the needs of each organization that accepts service learners (10). One of the most essential concerns emerging from this study is the recognition of the challenges associated with short-term service learning and the emphasis on the value of long-term relationships between the community partner and the institution (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

Furthermore, Tania D. Mitchell, David M. Donahue, and Courtney Young-Law (2012) analyze what they describe as "whiteness," a type of secure, social domination employed by White people over minorities in the United States, and how it can affect service-learning practices at the university level (612). They state that the "changing demographics of student enrollment should impel educators to examine how we implement service learning, paying attention to our biases, expectations, and traditions" (613). The authors argue that, without a critical focus, community-based learning can actually strengthen socially and racially constructed hierarchies and stereotypes, e.g., the privileged helping the underprivileged. And that university students participating in such activities may continue to reinforce white supremacy due to the fact that the majority is White, of traditional age, and middle-class.

I found these two studies to be enlightening and valuable when I began to search for community partners that would be a solid fit for my Spanish course. I asked myself “Who will be served?,” and made sure to critically approach questions of demographics and race in my classes and in participating organizations. Given that MSU Denver has a non-traditional student body and is located in an urban environment, Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law’s conceptual framework was not as applicable as I first thought. In effect, many of my students are juggling full-time jobs, debt, and family responsibilities. Many represented the same racial and socio-economic communities with which we were partnering. Moreover, our 2020 Strategic Plan acknowledges these differences in the student body and highlights our desire to create truly collaborative relationships with urban communities, not reinforce the racially and socially constructed hierarchies that already exist. This realization led to some changes in the service-learning course design seen in the research above, as I will briefly highlight later in this study.

DEVELOPMENT OF SPANISH 3110SL: ADVANCED CONVERSATION

The development of Spanish 3110SL began after I participated in a faculty learning community that focused on community-based learning. I decided to redesign our pivotal, third-year Spanish conversation course, a requirement for both the Spanish minor and major, and to add a service-learning component. The learning objectives of Spanish 3110SL aim to have students interact with each other, the professor, and members of the community, using the Spanish language, so that they will continue perfecting both written and oral Spanish and increase their cultural awareness of Latino/a culture and heritage in the Denver metropolitan area. Grammar, reading, and research assignments are included to stimulate group discussion and further develop students’ knowledge of Hispanic culture as

well as to develop more fluidity in their own formal Spanish-language expression. Combining written and oral skills with research, the students are required to find a community partner and complete a minimum of 15-20 hours of community-based learning throughout the course of the 15-week semester. At the end of the first week of the semester, I distribute a list of pre-approved community partners to help guide students, allowing them to select a partner with whom we have worked already, that may link directly to what the student is studying. For example, many of our majors and minors plan to teach in K-12 schools after graduating and thus choose to help out with after-school programs at one of our bilingual schools in the Denver Public School system. Another opportunity allows for students who are concurrently taking Nutrition classes to select a hunger relief center in downtown Denver and assist with on-site, dual-language (Spanish and English) nutrition courses or work directly with Spanish-speaking clients in the food markets.

Throughout the semester the students are asked to submit five reflective journal entries written in Spanish during Weeks 2, 4, 7, 12, and 14. With each entry, I provide a list of questions in Spanish to help stimulate contemplation and direct students toward the final project. For example, these questions ask students to define “service learning” or reflect on some of the challenges they have had during the semester. During Week 15, students are asked to create a digital story-telling project to share with the class and the greater community (it is publically uploaded to YouTube). Since the beginning of this course, these digital story-telling projects have been seen by other faculty members in the department and university, future students, and community partners. The capstone projects are a compilation of photos, video clips, interviews with the community partner, and reflective pieces that are then narrated by the students in Spanish (recorded voiceover). The service-learning components in this class serve

as 35% of the students' final grade and tie in directly with the student learning objectives of the course, such as interacting in everyday situations within the formal, target language; developing civic responsibility and civic awareness; and improving fluency in Spanish and cultural competency. To clarify, SL-designated courses at our university must directly or indirectly tie at least 33% of all graded components, activities, and the final project back to the service-learning experience in the class. However, there is not a requirement on how many hours the students must complete (15-20 hours throughout the semester in my case), meaning that the 33% is directly connected to the student production and learning objectives and not the amount of time spent in the community or with the partner. In summary, this particular structure allows for more flexibility in course design for and less pushback from non-traditional students with time constraints and other responsibilities, and has been supported by the higher administration and the university's curriculum committees.

OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

After having anonymous pre- and post-surveys approved through the Internal Review Board, I distributed them while teaching SPA 3110SL. The two surveys, which consisted of five open-ended questions, were given to the 20 students twice during the semester, once on the second day of class and then again on the last day of class (Tables 1 and 2).

Although this article does not allow me the space necessary to analyze all of the students' responses in the surveys, I would like to highlight the general consensus of the students and share some specific quotes to support my analysis.

During Week 1, students were asked how they would define service learning and whether they had any interest in identifying community needs. Overall, students made an effort to define community-based learning and to differentiate it from volunteer work or an internship. One student remarked, "It [service learning] means it is a different way to approach a classroom and receive more from it than a regular class. It is a chance to expand your experiences by

Table 1. Service-learning impact survey #1, administered on the second day of class.

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1. What does "Service Learning" mean to you?
 2. Did you take this class because you are interested in Service Learning? If so, why?
 3. Are you interested in identifying community needs and promoting the public good?
 4. Have you had any Service Learning experiences before taking this class? If so, explain.

Table 2. Service-learning impact survey #2, administered on the last day of class.

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1. What has been your overall experience with Service Learning this semester?
 2. Thinking about your community partner, what things would you like to change in the relationship? ... and stay the same?
 3. Do you feel as though you have made a difference in the community by participating in Service Learning?
 4. Do you believe that your Spanish has improved over the semester? If so, do you think the Service Learning component was beneficial in that process?
 5. While working with your community partner, did you feel like you had the opportunity to interact in

helping others.” With most of the responses, students expressed a desire to participate in service-learning projects and emphasized the appeal of being able to practice Spanish in a real-life setting while helping others. Another student commented, “I would like to use my Spanish skills towards an experience that will strengthen both my social skills as well as my foundations I have in Spanish.” As always, not all responses were so positive. One student conveyed uncertainty, sharing the fear that s/he might not have the extra time to commit to a service-learning project and enrolled in the class because “it was the only class that works with my schedule.” This particular situation was attributed to the non-traditional student’s schedule and, like I mention above, is actually quite common at MSU Denver. It is imperative that our students know ahead of time about the additional requirements of a service-learning class—one of the many reasons why we have advocated for the SL designation. This simple, but necessary, label assists students while registering each semester so that there are no surprises on the first day of class. It also allows for students to plan accordingly by rearranging their work schedule for that particular semester or finding extra child-care if needed.

The survey responses during Week 15 were encouraging. Almost every student who completed the survey confirmed that his or her overall experience with service learning had been enriching and productive. They spoke about their relationships with their partners and how they felt like they had made an impact in the community, in other words, civic responsibility and civic awareness. As one student put it, “I don’t think I would change anything and I really enjoyed being part of the organization also.” Another mentioned that “I think it was equally beneficial because what I didn’t know, they helped me and what they didn’t know, I helped them.” Many claimed that their Spanish improved over the semester, but they were unsure if it was because of the classroom experience or the service-

learning project. One student said “service-learning forced me to speak Spanish with the ESL [English as Second Language] population. It was great practice and experience for me especially since I will be working with the ESL population in the future.” In fact, one of the most common responses was in relation to the growing level of comfort while speaking in the target language, which satisfies one of the primary student learning objectives of the course.

Among the students, the biggest concern with including service learning in this class relates back to the particular demographic of many of the students and the non-traditional student experience. As I mentioned above, MSU Denver has a large percentage of Hispanic and Latino/a students, many of which take Spanish classes in the department. Since SPA 3110 is required for both Spanish majors and minors, the advanced students start with this class. Thus, this course tends to attract a high level of near-native Spanish speakers or heritage speakers who live in the Denver area. In SPA 3110SL, numerous Hispanic and Latino/a students are sent into the community to speak Spanish. At first, I did not anticipate that this would be an issue since many of the near-native Spanish speakers still need to practice their formal Spanish and can learn valuable life skills that might help them later in their career. However, there were a few students who complained about going back into the community from which they had just come. In other words, one of the reasons they enrolled in classes at MSU Denver was to have a more formal setting to learn and develop their Spanish. This was a completely novel concept and a thought-provoking dilemma. Although I was not exactly sure of all of the reasons why they felt this way, I turned to literature on non-traditional students and community engagement, like Largent’s study, and made an effort to address these interesting concerns.

Initially, I revisited the basic methodologies that service-learning scholars apply in their own classes (Elorriaga, 2007;

Nelson & Scott, 2008). Time and time again, faculty members and researchers in the field emphasize the importance of critical reflection assignments as a core component of community-based learning. Largent, addressing key elements for her service-learning class with non-traditional age students, states, "Quality reflection is a way for learners to take in information, consider it, and then integrate it into understanding or application of the information" (298). Along with connecting the service-learning experience to the course content, reflection assignments should encourage students to feel as though they contributed to meeting a community need. In other words, I wanted these students to truly think about all of the reasons why they were out in the community, i.e., not only to speak Spanish.

Another way I dealt with this issue was to make sure that time spent in class had a heavier focus on grammar, syntax, and formal vocabulary than traditionally taught sections, since many Latino/a heritage speakers have never studied Spanish in an academic setting before this class, i.e., mechanical grammar activities. For example, when students submitted their reflective journal entries, I graded them both for content—their critical analysis of their participation in the community of Denver prompted by pre-written questions—and for grammar/syntax, something that I had not planned on doing before. After reading and returning the entries to the students, I would then reformulate my class plans to include time and space for what I felt was most needed and relevant for that specific group of students. Case in point, we worked diligently on the question of tonic and written accents (which originally was not part of the planned curriculum or student learning objectives), since I noticed that various non-traditional students were struggling with orthography in their written reflections. In addition, I arranged informal, biweekly working groups via our online learning platform (Blackboard) so that students had the opportunity to apply new concepts and review grammatical rules in class while I was

present to assist them with any questions or doubts. Along with the introduction of new, formal vocabulary, in-class discussions, and online activities on a weekly basis, I was able to quell some of the insecurities and anxiety from my non-traditional students that were expressed at the beginning of the semester and offer a successful section (completed student learning objectives) of our department's required SPA 3110 class, with a community-based learning component. I have continued to use these techniques in more recent sections of the course.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, on many urban campuses there is a growing number of programs or services dedicated to high-impact practices. Prior to creating your own service-learning class for non-traditional students, I recommend exploring the internal support your institution might offer. For example, an Applied Learning Center might sponsor workshops for faculty in regard to course preparation or offer the opportunity to designate your course as service learning. In addition, some more broadly defined Teaching and Learning Centers might also have similar programming. The existence of these centers, or community-based and civic engagement structures, at an institution would demonstrate that service learning is supported by the administration. Campus Compact and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities American Democracy Project are two additional resources that work to promote civic engagement through community-based volunteerism, research, and course work.

Secondly, I encourage faculty members and staff to dedicate time researching methods of proper assessment of student artifacts, attitudinal changes, and of service-learning programs as a whole. Although it is not within the scope of this article, assessment is a crucial element in building and sustaining service learning as an essential component of the curriculum

(Pellettieri, 2001; Plann, 2002). Without proper assessment techniques and practices, it will be quite difficult to convince the higher administration that community-based learning is effective for the non-traditional student and worth the extra support. In the last 10 to 15 years, researchers across various fields have advocated for theoretically grounded studies and well-validated assessment tools that strive to justify the positive results that faculty, administration, and students are witnessing (Mitchell, 2009). However, these tools are not without inadequacies and shortfalls. We need to recognize that many of these assessment instruments and practices are still in their nascent stages and, due to the lack of literature, demand more research, especially for urban universities with non-traditional students.

Finally, I approach service-learning course design for non-traditional students with a “revise-and-resubmit” attitude. Namely, each time you teach your class, you will inevitably experience successes and failures. Do not be discouraged. In fact, this is very common. I have yet to meet a faculty member at our institution who has not had to modify aspects of his or her service-learning component, even at times mid-way through the semester. What is important is that you remain steadfast, revising features that are not working and solidifying those that are.

CONCLUSIONS

As Andrew Furco (1996) makes clear, experiential education is not static but in a constant state of flux, moving along the education continuum (12). From my own personal experience, Furco’s emphasis on flexibility within the field of service learning underscores some of the basic principals of community-based learning. That is, this field and pedagogical approach are still very much in the process of defining themselves. Faculty members, staff, and the administration must recognize that there is no established method on how to correctly im-

plement these strategies for non-traditional students and that there are even differentiating opinions on what service learning means and how applicable it can truly be. It is advice and insights from articles like this one that help us navigate this fairly new field and provide examples of tangible successes within the classrooms. In the case of MSU Denver, the set of challenges to establish a successful service-learning program and integrate community-based learning components into the classroom is unique. Being a large, public, urban university, our institution represents a different student demographic than most traditional colleges and universities in the United States. The students tend to be older with more family obligations and responsibilities. Moreover, almost all of the students are also working full-time or part-time while studying. There is a substantial lack of free time, economic resources, and transportation on the part of the students. These issues make community-based learning more challenging and demand a higher level of flexibility on behalf of the faculty and staff at the institution.

Regarding teaching Spanish at MSU Denver, faculty members and administrators must acknowledge the sizeable population of heritage Spanish speakers who decide to take classes in MDL. We are excited to have these non-traditional students in our courses, but curriculum development must take these specific student needs, such as flexibility and opportunities for application of material, into consideration while designing service-learning class components. In many ways, service learning is an excellent pedagogical approach to fulfill the particular demands of non-traditional students. They are allowed the opportunity to perform an indispensable service within the Hispanic community in Denver while also acquiring a more in-depth and formal understanding of the language and culture. Yet, it is not a perfect system and there are certain obstacles within the curriculum that still require attention, such as students who seek a more formal setting for learning. I have noticed a shortage of service-learning

literature focusing on the urban public university and the non-traditional student, specifically within Spanish language and Hispanic cultural instruction. My hope is that this article will initiate and facilitate that valuable conversation.

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AUTHOR NOTE

Graham Stefan Ignizio, Department of Modern Languages, Metropolitan State University of Denver.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Graham Stefan Ignizio.

Department of Modern Languages, Campus Box 26, P.O. Box 173362, Denver, CO 80217, gignizio@msudenver.edu