Service Learning and Italian

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Introduction

The Service Learning pedagogical approach has been firmly established in the United States for many decades now but it has had a relatively minimal impact so far in Europe. This is despite the many beneficial outcomes of the approach, particularly in the language classroom. In this article I will explain the Service Learning approach and show how it has been applied in NUI Galway in the Italian language classroom.

Service Learning

Service Learning, which is also known as Community Based Learning, involves students providing a service to their community in an area linked to their field of academic study. It differs from volunteering as students receive academic credit for the work they perform in the community and it also differs from work experience as the service is of benefit to the community and not just the student. Service Learning requires the engagement and the participation of the three elements of community, university and students in order to be successful (see diagram)
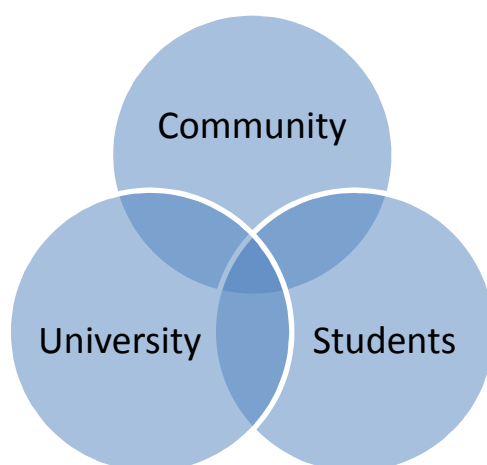
The approach links universities to the communities that surround them, shares resources, and adds an extra dimension to student learning. The community practice is structured, reflective and, if successful, benefits the student and the community alike. A balance is struck between academic learning and community service, and student learning extends into the community (Zlotkowski, 1999; McIlrath & MacLabhrainn, 2006; Sigmon, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

It has proven to be a highly effective approach with research showing that students who participate in these types of courses are more motivated in their studies, have improved academic performance and gain a range of transferable skills such as self-confidence and organisational and interpersonal skills (Astin, *et al.*, 2000; Gray, 1999; Eyler, 2000; McKenna & Rizzo, 1999). It has been found to be such an important pedagogical approach that, in some American universities, participation on a Service Learning course is now an obligatory part of the undergraduate programme. Overall, more than 1,100 colleges and universities which between them have some 6 million students belong to the umbrella group for the approach, Campus Compact (www.compact.org).

Languages have been particularly successful in introducing Service Learning and student services have been provided in the community in many areas where a knowledge of languages can be beneficial. Examples of successful courses include students serving as a conversation partners, volunteering as interpreters in the community, tutoring or mentoring children and adolescents, facilitating story hours and other cultural activities for children in libraries and community centres, and assisting local churches and community organizations with educational and social programs. Courses have also been designed around providing foreign language content for websites, community associations, and publicity material for voluntary groups. Many of the courses developed in America involve interaction with large Spanish-speaking communities near the universities. Students prepare for the Service Learning placements in class, take part in activities in the community and reflect on the experience and how it might have enhanced their language, cultural and social skills.

It has been found that language students who take part in a Service Learning course have improved language skills – they are more fluent and less apprehensive in their language use and have greater communicative competence. (Morris, 2001; Overfield, 1997; Caldwell, 2007) Service Learning almost always lowers the affective filter of the students (Dahms & Daniels, 2008) and its benefits extend beyond language acquisition to encompass wider cultural competence (Fitzgerald, 2009; Munoz-Christian, 2010; Jouët-Pastré & Braga, 2005; Weldon & Trautmann, 2003). Service Learning helps students understand diversity and multiculturalism and overall, it can enhance and enrich language study, while also increasing cultural awareness and sensitivity. Students gain many skills which would be less accessible in a traditional classroom environment and generally emerge from the Service Learning experience with improved personal confidence and motivation. In short, these courses bridge the gap between university and community, foster a positive attitude towards language learning, give students the opportunity to engage in practical work and also enhance students' civic engagement. Furthermore, there are distinct learning benefits: students are given a deeper understanding of what they have learned in class and are encouraged to think critically. It can therefore be a very valuable experience for students and a popular element in the university curriculum.

Service Learning and Italian at NUI Galway

Civic engagement is embedded in NUI Galway as part of the university's strategic plan and the Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI) within the university fosters civic engagement amongst staff and students. Service Learning courses exist in the field of engineering, law, IT, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and philosophy, amongst others (see www.nuigalwaycki.ie). The key objectives of Service Learning at NUI Galway are to create opportunities to integrate and relate theory to practice, enhance partnerships between the university and the wider community, and increase the civic, academic, personal and professional capacity of students through experiential learning. A Service Learning and Italian course has been running since 2006 and is offered to students in the final year of their undergraduate programme. It is weighted at 5 ECTS and is offered over the academic year. During the first semester of the course students learn about the theoretical side of language learning and language teaching. In the second semester they put this theory into practice by teaching introductory classes in Italian to primary-school pupils in the Galway area. On the successful completion of the Italian classes, the school pupils (on average 100) come to campus where they participate in an awards ceremony and an 'Italian Day'. The university course is assessed through an essay and presentation in the first semester and, following the school placement, a teaching portfolio and structured reflection is submitted. Reflection is a key element of the course and has been described as the link between the service and the learning (Eyler, 2002). By reflecting on the success or otherwise of individual classes and on their overall teaching experiences, university students arrive at a deeper understanding of how they have learnt from their service experience. Through reflection, the service experience can become an educational experience. Students reflect on the application of theory to practice, preconceived notions, surprising events and personal development.

This course aims to foster positive attitudes towards language learning amongst both the primary-school and the university students. Between 70 and 80% of final-year students opt to participate in the course. Students are motivated to take the course for professional reasons because they have an interest in teaching, a desire to gain experience in the field and because of the benefits of the course for their future careers. However, many students who take the course also cite a civic motivation, a desire to promote languages in the community, to bring skills to an area where there is a gap. Furthermore, students also enrol because of personal motivation, hoping that the course will help with confidence and the ability to convey a message, which will add to their personal skills-set and increase their knowledge of languages. For example, when applying to take part in the programme, one student said: 'Being a student of foreign languages myself and having spent some time as a teacher of English as a foreign language I would be very interested to experience another side of the language acquisition process. I think this would be a very unique and rewarding way of contributing to the community here in Galway whilst also gaining new skills and experiences myself.' Another student wrote: 'I would like to take part in this initiative as

it would be an ideal opportunity to use the language skills that I've acquired while gaining valuable experience, also. I have a great interest in volunteer work and love working with children. I feel that this initiative will be very beneficial to the children as exposure to European language and culture will broaden their minds and prepare them for future study. I believe it is also important to have a varied choice of language in school and for too long Italian has been neglected. I was involved with drama and love the idea of using fun and role-play to teach language. It should begin at a much younger age, as this will enhance their primary school experience and facilitate further language study. I would love to have the opportunity to share my enthusiasm and passion for Italian with these children.'

Students who participate in the course have, over the years, demonstrated good attendance, participation, motivation, reflection, and active learning. The Service Learning elements impact on their engagement and they have greater personal input into learning, creativity, and teamwork. The experiential nature of the learning generally leads to increased confidence, and indicative comments on the impact of the course include:

- 'I didn't expect the six weeks' teaching to change me as much as it did. I really grew in confidence, not only in general but also specifically, in terms of confidence in my ability in Italian.'
- 'Over the six weeks I noticed a significant development in my own confidence in the classroom. I started to relish the whole experience by coming up with innovative and new ideas to make learning but also teaching fun.'
- 'Teaching Italian not only increased my awareness about social issues but also enhanced my own educational experience and personal development. I got the opportunity to see Italian in its most practical and real sense.'
- 'It was different from all the other modules. It challenged different aspects of my educational experience. But I thought it was very good as it gave us great freedom but also great responsibility.'

There is a distinct community need locally for the service that the students provide. A recent Eurostat report noted that foreign language learning at primary level in Ireland is the lowest in Europe (24/09/2010). This course helps at a local level to introduce pupils to languages, hopefully whetting the pupils' appetite for more when the opportunity arises. The focus in the Italian classes is on enjoying language learning and the benefits to the school children are both tangible and intangible: they learn some Italian but, more importantly, in their brief experience they realise that they can do languages and that language learning can be enjoyable. The course was awarded the European Language Label in 2007 for innovation and creativity in language teaching and learning.

There are, of course, challenges associated with running the course – it requires much administrative attention from the course co-ordinator and it moves from the controlled environment of the university classroom to the far more unpredictable context of the

outside community. Students can be quite nervous about the experience and assessment of learning outcomes is not as straightforward as in other courses. However, these challenges are generally outweighed by the many benefits that the course can offer: the university student benefits by learning about language acquisition, gaining practical teaching experience and also enhanced community involvement; the primary-school children benefit from increased exposure to modern languages; the university benefits from increased links with the community; and the language department benefits from an enhanced profile of modern languages within schools.

Conclusion

One may ask why Italian instructors should be interested in Service Learning and the answers are many. Apart from the documented benefits to student learning and the student experience, Service Learning also raises the profile of the language in the community and in the university. It makes the language visible and shares resources with the community. A well-structured course, where university, student and community needs are aligned, can be of benefit to all partners involved. The experience of Service Learning and Italian at NUI Galway has been very beneficial and could easily be replicated elsewhere by other instructors to suit both their communities' and their student's needs.

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