

# A Case Study of Community-Based Learning: Centre College in Danville, Kentucky

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WE HAVE accepted that there will be no way to achieve what we set out to do without a significant expenditure of faculty time; without faculty members' willingness to expose their vulnerability and risk their authenticity; and without their willingness to reach out, in collaborative fashion, to those nonfaculty members of the institution and the community who can provide support, resources, and enthusiasm to our students both before and after the study-abroad or service-learning experience. (Ward 26)

Community-based learning is time-consuming and costly, but in the Spanish program at Centre College we have found that if we organize and implement the program well, the students come out energized, thinking critically, and with improved language skills both in Spanish and English. Community-based learning allows what Parker Palmer refers to as "direct unmediated access to the subject." It gives students a

passion for the subject that propels that subject and not the teacher into the center of the learning circle—and when a great thing is in their midst, students have direct access to the energy of learning and of life. (120)

What follows is a brief case study of the evolution of community-based learning in Spanish language classes at Centre College. Our program is perhaps unusual in that Centre does not have a large urban population to draw on for its service, since it is a small liberal arts college in Danville, Kentucky, a town of about 18,000 residents, a thousand of whom are Latinos—primarily undocumented. Centre has about 1,100 students, most of whom are white, from the second generation in their families to attend college, and relatively affluent. The student body tends to be rather conservative and well behaved; the students are also often dependent learners. That dependence leads at times to a sort of complacency

and a concomitant simplistic view of race, class, and gender. However, they generally believe in the value of community service and philanthropy. In 1996 the Spanish program, inspired by the mission of Centre College (to prepare its students for lives of learning, service, and leadership), initiated a service-learning component in some of our Spanish classes. We hoped to take advantage of the students' belief in volunteerism and at the same time give them an opportunity to energize their language learning. We started out knowing very little about the literature pertaining to service learning or the community we would serve. Ten years later, we have a full-blown program, so successful that it has allowed Centre students and faculty members to open and run a local Centro Latino with the help of grant money from the 3M Corporation and the United Way.

In 1996, we made our first tentative and hopeful foray into service learning by requiring intermediate Spanish students to complete ten hours of community service that was somehow linked with Spanish.<sup>1</sup> Projects included writing, illustrating, and even delivering children's books in Spanish; volunteering to help teach English at the local Literacy Center; teaching Spanish to elementary students; and tutoring Latino schoolchildren in English. Service learning constituted 10% of their grade, and students received full credit if they completed their project. We had a lot to learn. We were criticized by

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colleagues for enforced volunteerism and for substituting anti-intellectual fluff for serious study. We also encountered problems with uneven levels of student participation, which sometimes overwhelmed the elementary schools with Centre College volunteers, and a lack of clarity on the part of schoolteachers concerning their role in our students' projects. Some of the Latino high school students felt stigmatized when gringos walked around with them on campus. Moreover, as instructors we lacked both a working definition of service learning and a way to sustain our projects. We were not familiar enough with the Latino community and its needs. We were sorely tempted to give up: service learning is imperfect. But once our students completed their projects, many wanted to take more Spanish, some wanted to continue volunteering after the semester was over, and some commented that the service component had been the most valuable experience of the class. We decided it was time to conduct research in the growing body of literature about service learning and to streamline our projects to be more in line with the wishes of the Latino community.

We began by teaching an independent-study course on service learning to four highly motivated and well-prepared Spanish students. As part of the course, we met local leaders from churches, schools, and the health-care field. We also became acquainted with the migrant outreach coordinator in a nearby county. When these local leaders found out about our interest in service, they invited us to participate in a Century 21 grant for an after-school tutoring program for Latino children, which also served to introduce other children to Spanish. Our participation turned out to be an enormous amount of work, but these four students did most of it, reporting back to us and making sure that Spanish faculty members met with the local leaders that the students deemed most ready and willing to help. For their final project the students prepared *PowerPoint* presentations about service learning and wrote research papers about what local Latinos most needed and how we might work with institutions already in place to achieve our goals.

Since we were still concerned about the charges of anti-intellectualism and enforced volunteerism, the independent-study students also read extensively in the growing body of literature on service learning. We read John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Robert Sigmond. We looked for ways to incorporate Sigmond's notion that "[s]ervice-learning replaces the traditional

paternalistic, one-way volunteer or community service with service based on the grassroots needs of the community" (Tilley-Lubbs, Raschio, Jorge, and López 161). We also sought to incorporate the views of Alice Weldon and Gretchen Trautmann of the University of North Carolina, Asheville. They assert:

In a service learning program, individuals engage in community activities in a context of rigorous academic experience. . . . The service provided by the student flows from and into course objectives, is integrated into the course by means of assignments that require some form of reflection on the service in light of course objectives, and the assignment is assessed and evaluated accordingly. (574)

By now we didn't see how we could possibly keep all the balls in the air: most of the Spanish faculty was not yet tenured, had a heavy teaching schedule, and had a demanding research agenda, and our committee work was growing daily. We could not imagine how we could incorporate such a time-consuming and ambitious project into any of our Spanish classes. Fortunately, just then the language programs at Centre College received a large endowment from the Humana Foundation, specifically to enhance student learning and contact with other cultures.

Without the financial support from Centre College, it would have been virtually impossible to implement community-based learning successfully. With it, the Spanish program was able to hire a language assistant and service-learning coordinator, Elizabeth Dahms, whose responsibilities are to make contacts in the community, set up orientation for the students participating in service learning, talk to language classes about service-learning options, meet frequently with the Spanish faculty, and keep abreast of research in the field of service learning.

In 2003, our service-learning program changed dramatically. We implemented a program based on Richard Raschio's five critical elements of effective service-learning practice: orientation, training, implementation, reflection, and evaluation, known by the acronym OTIRE. Students now have orientation and training with the service-learning coordinator and their onsite supervisor. Reflection and evaluation are more difficult and time-consuming to implement (they require class time and grading), but we believe them to be imperative for creating reciprocal relationships with the community we serve. The students now know from the syllabus that service learning is about learning, observation, and reflection. The students not only must reflect on their

experiences—how their backgrounds shape their responses, for example—but also must think about and research overarching systems that set up the dynamic for the needs of those served. The OTIRE method transcends the traditional notion of reflection, which includes only emotional responses:

In [Raschio's] model, reflection includes the emotional component, but goes on to provide students with opportunities to process the experience at two other levels: learning and thinking. Students react to questions that help them relate their experiences in the project with the course content on several levels in an effort to show that they fulfilled the goals of the course. This aspect is important to underscore, because in service-learning, credit is not given for the service alone, but also for the relevant learning that the service project helps to garner. (Tilley-Lubbs, Raschio, Jorge, and López 163)

In fact, the students' reflection and evaluation are what became the driving force behind our current service project. What we found out as we studied community needs on the one hand and support agencies on the other was that a number of services available to Hispanics went unused because no one knew about them. Furthermore, an organization tended to be ignorant of what others had to offer. So our project grew from a combination of the needs of the community and the students' observations. With this information, we wrote a successful grant application to the 3M Corporation to begin a Centro Latino, with the broad goal of fostering mutually beneficial relationships in the Latino community, the larger Danville community, and Centre College students and faculty members. Our other objectives are to advance Spanish-language skills and cultural sensitivity of Centre College students, to improve the lives of Latinos in Danville and Boyle County, and to facilitate the work of local agencies that work with the Latino population. Finally, we hope to break down the town/gown divide by involving Centre students in the well-being of the broader community.

The Centro functions as a referral center in which Latinos receive pertinent information about local agencies offering services to the Hispanic community. It coordinates among the organizations, keeping everyone abreast of services offered. This is a major undertaking. Student volunteers and staff members regularly attend United Human Service meetings in Boyle County to network with social service agencies. The Centro also subscribes to the Migrant Network Coalition electronic discussion list to maintain contact with and seek advice

from other institutions that work with Latinos in Kentucky. The Centro Latino actively seeks partnerships with other social service providers in the community. For over a year, the Centro has assisted Danville's Families First organization in a biweekly Hispanic clinic housed at a local pediatrics clinic.

Already we have helped more than five hundred Latino clients obtain medical and social services. Centro volunteers regularly assist clients in making medical, optometric, and dental appointments, accompanying many to appointments to interpret. Part of the learning experience for some students involved an interpretation course to complete a certificate in medical interpreting: this demanding course took up five Saturdays of the students' time, for a total of forty hours of class time. One of the special features of the course was a local Latino community member's participation in the workshop, sponsored by the Centro's funds, which allowed the person to gain valuable experience in interpreting; at the same time it exposed students to real-life contact with the Latino community.

From an academic perspective, the Centro Latino enhanced classroom studies by having student volunteers interpret during oral interviews with native Spanish speakers.<sup>2</sup> For example, volunteers interpreted interviews with Latinos for Rick Axtell's religion class at Centre, Poverty and Homelessness. Another example of a course that extended beyond the physical limits of its classroom was an upper-division Spanish course in spring 2005, Hispanic Children's Literature, by Genny Ballard. For the service component, her class initiated a children's story hour at the Centro, treating a different theme each week. While reading to the children, providing them with snacks, and playing with them, not only did the Spanish students become more proficient in Hispanic children's literature, they also gained experience in public reading (it was harder than they first thought). An unexpected by-product of the experience was the in-depth class discussion of the Patriot Act and the legal ramifications of arranging for transportation for children, who may not be documented, to and from such an innocuous activity as a children's story hour. (In fact, Ballard finally told the students they could not transport anyone to the event. Eventually, to avoid legal problems, the venue had to be changed to the public schools.)

We teachers in the Spanish program have a keen interest in how our students' linguistic skills develop through participation in community-based learning.

The development is of course difficult to evaluate with precision, and results have been mixed—much progress depends on the skill and motivation of the individual student. We assess our students' progress by requiring both oral (in-class presentations) and written (journals, reports) components of their projects. A surprising result (and one impossible to measure) is that the students involved in community-based learning seem to have come out of this experience with a different attitude toward Spanish. They no longer solely think of it as a requirement; for them it has become a living language that they positively associate with relationships they fostered in the community.

Philosophically and pedagogically, service learning is in line with the Spanish program's approach to language acquisition. In general, we endorse the communicative approach, and community-based learning is an ideal setting in which to put this theory into practice. We have found that students are much more likely to work to build vocabulary and grammatical structures if they are in situations where they need to communicate. Often, students no longer perceive grammar and vocabulary as discrete acts to be later forgotten but rather as necessary tools for conversation.

Service learning almost always lowers the affective filter of the students. Participants do not necessarily come away from the experience with a mastery of the preterite versus the imperfect or with a firm grasp of the nuances of the subjunctive mood. But almost all have increased their confidence in the target language. They are no longer afraid of hearing spoken Spanish or attempting to speak it. My colleague Julie James states:

We give the students the tools and the rules in class. What community-based learning offers is the space for the students to negotiate these rules. They learn the skills of communication. That is, they begin to fill in the blanks they don't yet have words for, and they learn how to follow up with questions about something they do not entirely understand.

When students are placed in spontaneous situations as opposed to the controlled classroom, they begin to learn socially appropriate applicability of language choice and begin to understand how to complement their limited language skills with nonverbal communication. The result is increased confidence in listening and conversing. This confidence is a first step toward fluency.

Yet we do not call service learning, as many do, a living-language laboratory. The experience must be

academic, yet it is also a symbiotic one, and we are unwilling to sacrifice members of the Latino community simply so that our students have an opportunity to practice their Spanish. It is imperative that service learning be a mutually beneficial relationship. Therefore, as language professors we try to facilitate the students' transition into it by tailoring language exercises toward specific sites before the students start their orientation and training. Before Ballard's students implemented the highly successful Latino story hour, she had them practice reading children's books out loud to one another and to her. She therefore not only prepared her students by honing their reading and pronunciation skills but also helped them anticipate questions that the children might ask. When students' service projects are going to involve interviewing members of the community, we try to educate students on interviewing styles and skills and have them conduct mock interviews before sending them into the community. Not surprisingly, the more prepared they are when they begin their projects, the more successful the projects turn out to be—both practically and linguistically. James has found that students are better able to develop their language skills if their service sites directly pertain to their curricular or co-curricular interests. Thus participants are encouraged to take on only those projects in which they foresee an eventual career. For example, a pre-dental student created brochures in Spanish for local dentists and gave oral presentations in Spanish at local elementary schools to teach children about the importance of good oral hygiene. In this manner the student was able to merge her professional interests with her linguistic expertise, all while providing a much-needed service in the local community.

An additional albeit unexpected benefit of community-based learning was the improvement of students' writing skills in English. On their own initiative, Centro Latino student-volunteers decided there needed to be emergency dental care for local Latino children. The volunteers had already researched incentives that other communities and centers used to persuade dentists to give free care or generous discounts to Latino clients. The students were sitting at computers writing and rewriting drafts of a letter to be hand-delivered to local dentists. This task taught us an important lesson: when there was an immediate positive purpose for writing, students were eager to improve their skills.

Another day, we entered the Centro to find several student-volunteers writing a small grant (\$500).

Once the students realized there might be money for a well-articulated project, they got excited. Together, we spent a lot of time talking about the strengths and weaknesses of their writing and how they could make their case convincing. Happily, their effort paid off: they got the grant. With the funds, they hosted a town forum to address the numerous negative interactions Centro clients had been reporting with the Danville police and to clarify the Kentucky driving laws. The discussion, which was held in Spanish, brought together the Danville police department, the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, members of the Centro Latino, and members of the Latino community. The Centro's role was to serve as neutral host of the discussion and contract a third-party interpreter so that all could express themselves in their native language. The turnout exceeded expectations; more than fifty-five Latinos and about a dozen Anglos attended. Participants left satisfied, pleased that for the first time Latinos had been able to voice their concerns directly to the assistant police chief and to hear his responses thanks to the help of an interpreter. Since then, Dahms and student volunteers have applied for other grants and received \$5,000 from the Toyota Foundation and \$25,000 from the United Way, ensuring that the Centro will remain open beyond the original funding from 3M.

Service learning requires time, money, and dedication. We have found that it is extremely important to make explicit the goals of community-based learning, how service learning serves the mission of the college, the Spanish program, and overall educational goals. One successful implementation of community-based learning was in Mary Daniels's two second-semester intermediate Spanish classes, where forty students were involved in community-based learning. Many worked at the Centro Latino, helping organize yet another town forum; some worked in after-school programs teaching English; and some worked for the Danville Literacy Center. Dahms spoke in Daniels's classes, in which one class period every three weeks was dedicated to student-led discussion of service learning. Sometimes the class discussed an article students had read on service learning; sometimes they talked about their frustrations and worked at problem solving. On the last day of class, the students handed in two assignments. In one, they researched a broader system that affected the people with whom they had worked (e.g., bilingual education, the Minute

Men, the guest-worker program). In the other, they wrote a shorter paper for future service-learning participants, making specific suggestions for ways to implement effectively future activities at their service site. The students left their sites with the satisfaction of knowing that their participation helped ensure that individuals in the community would continue to receive much-needed aid.

As Gretchen Tilly-Lubbs, Richard Raschio, Ethel Jorge, and Silvia López have pointed out, the marriage of "the academy and the community"<sup>3</sup> is a powerful teaching tool: it improves student engagement, and having a personal stake in the community gives students a reason to invest in language learning. Although community-based learning is time-intensive, we have found that the excitement it generates among the students, the improvement in their Spanish-speaking and -listening comprehension, the real-life contact with the community, and the sensitivity that contact engenders to be well worth the effort.

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## Notes

1. During the first few years, Elizabeth Dahms was not yet the service-learning coordinator. She joined the Spanish program as a full-time staff member in 2003. However, she has been involved in every element of service learning as it began during her freshman year at Centre College. We thank our former colleague Chalene Helmuth, who was highly involved in these first attempts at service learning and helped propel the Centre College Spanish program in that direction.

2. We thank our colleagues in Spanish and religion for allowing us to use specific examples from their classes in this article. We also especially thank Helen Emmitt, Julie James, and Genny Ballard for their input and help in the writing of this piece.

3. For a more extensive discussion on the benefits of service learning, see Tilly-Lubbs, Raschio, Jorge, and López 162.

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