

Students as Teachers: Creating a Service Learning Course in French

by Jody L. Ballah

It is the prevailing attitude among foreign language educators that students will acquire a language more fluently if active learning is involved. In fact, most second language acquisition literature suggests that students learn a foreign language better and can see the advantages to academic course work as part of their program of study when they can actively engage in the production of the language outside of the classroom in some meaningful way (Carter). Moreover, students have additional opportunities to increase their cultural awareness and competency when they are exposed to an authentic communication environment. As an instructor of French in Cincinnati, Ohio, I have found it challenging to provide authentic contexts for my students to engage in active learning in French. After forming a partnership with a local elementary school, I began to develop a service learning course which saw my students take on the role of teacher instructing the children in basic French as part of an after school enrichment program. This paper will describe the creation of the service learning course at the University of Cincinnati including content, assessment, materials and logistics. In addition, I will discuss preliminary findings on how this course has affected my students' proficiency in French, as well as their confidence in speaking the language in a meaningful context outside of the classroom.

As detailed in a study conducted by Cooper, students who take on the role of teacher not only make profound personal connections with the children and the community in which they are working, but also with the material they are studying and teaching. In fact, my students were able to see the "bigger picture" of language learning and its importance in society. Because most of my students had themselves attended elementary school in Ohio, they were aware that despite countless studies recommending early introduction of foreign languages in the school curriculum, children were not generally taught French formally before the age of twelve, often missing an

important developmental period in language development as defined by linguists (Interested readers should consult the recent overview of age-related factors and L2 ultimate attainment by Muñoz and Singleton). This awareness in some of my students motivated them to take part in this service learning program as a way to advocate for language learning at the elementary level, as well as for their own personal learning experience.

The University of Cincinnati has defined service learning as follows:
 “Service Learning is a specially designed learning experience in which students combine reflections with structured participation in community-based projects to achieve specified learning outcomes as part of an academic course and/or program requirement.” (*University of Cincinnati, Centre for Community Engagement 2008*)

This wide definition allowed me the freedom to choose a community partner that would fit my needs, my students’ needs as well as those of the elementary school. Institutional support is provided for all service learning courses that include program development, forms, professional development and possible funding. I was able to obtain a small grant during my first year of the program to purchase teaching materials for the students to use at the school.

When developing this course for my students, I wanted to include as many groups as possible. I therefore decided that I would open up the program to any student who had taken at least one semester of French at the college level. Because basic vocabulary and sentence structure are covered in this time period, students would have acquired the necessary knowledge base for this level of instruction. Since I cast my recruitment net so wide, I had students with varying levels and experience with French. This allowed me to pair and group students who would complement each other. As none of the students were education majors, or trained teachers, I wanted them to teach in pairs or small groups for mutual support. Working with a school board necessitated background and criminal records checks which I took as the supervisor and therefore I remained in the classroom with students for legal reasons and emergency purposes.

At the University of Cincinnati, our academic year is divided into three ten-week quarters. Because the after school program runs for six consecutive weeks, this allows for a four-week period in the college classroom for the students and me to prepare for the service learning experience before we go into the school. During these four weeks, I distribute readings about second language teaching to children on a variety of topics ranging from designing a lesson, classroom management and the benefits of learning language at a young age. Subsequently, the students design a curriculum for the six weeks of teaching. First, we make a list of the topics that the students feel should be included. These topics generated were comprised of themes normally attractive to children and beginning language learners such as greetings, animals, family, food, etc. After the list has been compiled, the students work in their small teaching groups to come up with activities centered around these themes and topics. Our final week in the college classroom is devoted to practice teaching where students put their plans into action.

Once the after school program starts, students quickly get to know the children and form bonds from the first day. On the whole, the students who choose to participate in this program want to work with children and are adaptable to behavior and organizational challenges. At this point in the program, the teaching sessions are the primary focus. However, students must attend a one-hour debriefing session on a day following the class they have taught each week. In addition to providing a forum for students to freely discuss problems, successes and general comments, this also allows us to maintain a sense of community as a class even though the students may be teaching in different groups at different times.

I chose a variety of assessment methods for this course. Because I designed the program to give students the opportunity to speak French in a meaningful environment outside of the classroom, I am interested in measuring any growth in their language skills. For this reason, I have students take a pre-test and a post-test at the beginning and end of the program. These tests take two forms: oral and written. When assigning a grade for these tests, I take into consideration the students' level of language and their improvement, if any, over the course of

the program. The written tests are given raw scores and the oral tests are scored with a rubric that I use when evaluating oral proficiency in my language classes.

Since working in the service learning environment is the key learning outcome for this course, much of the grade is attributed to the students' planning, attendance, engagement and debriefing after each teaching session. I use a rubric to assign each student a grade for every week of the program. On my syllabus, I detail the expectations for attendance, participation and preparation for each class at the school, as well as for each debriefing session at the college.

Much of service learning research suggests that student reflection is a key element in the learning experience (Butin). Consequently, my students must reflect on each teaching session according to my detailed question prompts which ask students to describe, analyze and evaluate their experience. I created a blog as the forum for student reflection. Using blogs as a context for critical thinking is common practice in many disciplines, but it is particularly effective in the area of teaching. Yang states that blog use among student teachers not only promotes critical reflection but also creates a sense of community amongst the students when they do not always meet together in a face to face environment. I found my students to be very open and thoughtful in their blog postings, and they were very engaged in commenting on their colleagues' entries.

As a final assessment, I asked students to write a personal reflection on their experiences teaching beginning French to the children. I assigned very specific questions which ranged from asking students about their confidence level in French, to what they would do differently if they were to teach again. Students were graded on their ability to answer all questions sufficiently while demonstrating a deeper level of reflection. It was through these reflective papers that I learned more about my students and about myself as a teacher than I had expected. More specifically, I discovered that students' confidence level in speaking is not necessarily linked to their proficiency in French, a link which is often assumed on the part of the language teacher.

When students are engaged in using the foreign language in a setting outside of the classroom, they develop as autonomous learners, taking active responsibility for their learning

and thereby increasing the likelihood that the language skills will be retained in the future (Carter, 2005). As a result, students' confidence level in the new language will increase as they experience success outside of the traditional classroom, and they are empowered in their own language learning. This was very true for my students. In fact, when asked about their confidence level and how, if at all, this changed throughout the course of the service learning program, every student stated that their confidence had improved, despite the fact that they may not all have improved their language proficiency on the post-tests. This has led me to think about incorporating some activities in my French language classes which encourage learner autonomy at this level; for example, taking French outside of the classroom and putting it on display in areas where French is not normally found on our campus.

One of my initial goals when creating this program was to increase student proficiency in French. Indeed, the results of the pre-tests and post-tests do show an increase in the aggregate. However, as mentioned above, not all of the students demonstrated increased proficiency by earning a higher score on the tests. Some stayed at the same level and two students in fact decreased slightly. While it is impossible to control for other factors that may have contributed to the lower scores, my initial disappointment was replaced with delight after reading the students' reflection papers. A much higher emphasis was placed on how students felt about themselves as French speakers. It was an overwhelming sentiment among the students that this experience challenged their language skills, but also allowed them to use French in a context that they had never anticipated before, thus opening up a new world of possibilities for their college career. In fact, during the first year I offered this program, two students decided to change their major to education and others have discovered that working with children is something they wish to pursue.

I would be remiss if I did not address certain challenges which arose during the development and implementation of this program. Since any service learning activity involves outside agencies that have their own policies and procedures different from and often opposite to those of a university, compromises must often be reached (Butin). For example, during the

winter months, elementary schools have weather policies regarding school closures that we do not have at the university. As a result, we had to arrange for make-up classes with the children at times that did not always coincide with our academic schedule. In addition, students are responsible for their own transportation to and from the service learning site which may cause additional challenges for them. Legal and institutional constraints also had an effect on how I designed the program; in particular my role in the elementary school setting. As mentioned previously, I had to undergo the traditional background and criminal record checks through the school board, not my students. Consequently, I had to be in the room at all times with the children. While this was rewarding for me personally and I believe supportive for my students, the teacher-student relationship was still implicit which may have impacted the experience. Although by no means insurmountable, the set of challenges specific to a service learning course must certainly be examined carefully before implementation of the program.

The benefits of creating a service learning program are tremendous and far reaching. From my perspective, I saw my humble idea of inserting French into a local afterschool program turn into a transformative experience for my students, the children and their parents at the elementary school, and for myself. Although my program is very small (in the two years I have offered this course I have had seventeen students participate) its impact has been felt on a larger scale. I have had several students continue on to the next level of French language, even after it was no longer a program requirement. We have grown the French program in our department to include content courses in literature, film and culture and have begun a study abroad program in French. While I have no statistical data to correlate my service learning course with an increased enrolment in French at my institution, I do receive inquiries about the service learning program from students on other campuses, as well as requests from local parents to offer French in other schools within the district. In a larger context, my students have become aware of the need to advocate for foreign language education in the school system. While we currently struggle to keep language programs alive in Ohio, these students and the children they are teaching, may in fact one day become the politicians who are deciding the fate of French in the education system.

By far, the greatest satisfaction I have had during this experience has been the opportunity to see a different side of my students than I would ordinarily see in a traditional classroom setting. Students could see a value in their foreign language education, something that is often lost amongst program requirements and credit hours. In a real world setting which has consequences outside of the classroom, French took on an authentic role, something more than a required course. I witnessed my students engaging with the children, with each other and with the French language in an environment of cooperation, discovery, fun and pride. As a language educator, this is what I strive for in my classes, the ability to make language meaningful. I cannot ask for a better outcome, and I feel very privileged to be a part of this program.

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