A Statewide Initiative in Service-Learning and Community-Based Instruction

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Abstract: Residential institutes for K-12 Spanish teachers were held in 2001 and 2002 on the main campus of The Ohio State University. The institutes focused on Latinos in Ohio and incorporated service-learning and community-based instruction as key principles. Participants surveyed resources in their home communities and developed thematic instructional units for use with their own students. Consciousness about Latino issues, service-learning, and community-based instruction was further raised through workshops presented by the institute participants at the annual meeting of the state foreign language association.

Key Words: Service learning, community-based instruction, K-12 teachers, Latinos

Introduction

During the summer months of 2001 and 2002, two residential institutes for K-12 Spanish teachers were held on the main campus of The Ohio State University. The primary objective of these institutes was to carry the content and format of Ohio State’s undergraduate service-learning course, “Spanish in Ohio,” to a statewide level with impact on K-12 education. A detailed description of the institutes (Long and Morgan) may be found in the AATSP Professional Development Series Handbook, Juntos: Community Partnerships in Spanish and Portuguese.

In the institutes, the participants learned about Latinos in Ohio from guest speakers representing many sectors of the community including agriculture, business, education, government, health care, media, public safety, religion, restaurants, and social services. Some of these contacts took place on the Ohio State campus, and some were the objectives of field trips in Columbus and other areas of the state. Participants worked in small groups led by master teachers to develop units of instruction that incorporated the “Standards for Learning Spanish” (1999) and general principles of service-learning and community-based instruction.

Setting the stage for community engagement

The institute participants carefully planned orientation activities and materials to introduce their students to Latinos in Ohio and the United States. Demographic materials distributed during the institute and information downloaded from the Census 2000 website (<http://www.census.gov/mso/www/pres_lib/hisorig/sld001.htm>) served as the foundational materials. One of the primary objectives of the two institutes was to lay the groundwork for engaging K-12 Spanish students in service-learning activities. Although many school districts in Ohio have volunteer service requirements, the institute directors found that the reflective component of service-learning, as well as the linguistic and cultural components of Spanish study, were not part of this movement. Given the myriad differences in school philosophies, policies, and bureaucracies, the teachers themselves were the obvious experts in determining appropriate service-learning activities for their own schools and communities. The necessary first step,
however, was to identify resources in their local communities and develop resource guides for students and other teachers. The resource guides (including addresses, phone numbers, and Internet URLs) included such diverse venues as art galleries and museums, radio and television stations, restaurants, book, music, and video stores, churches, markets, and social service agencies. By sharing resource guides, the participants extended their knowledge about Latino communities in Ohio and were able to plan field trips and other activities in neighboring communities.

Service-learning activities for K–12 students

Food was a popular theme for the instructional units developed by the institute participants, as well as other typical themes addressed in Spanish courses: migrant workers, art, music, dance, bilingual careers, sports, clothing, etc. Student activities comprised a variety of investigative and “hands-on” tasks related to the themes, including assigned readings (periodical, Internet, and literary), surveys, vocabulary searches, map/geography activities, and review of grammar structures. It would be impossible to include a complete description of the many thematic units and activities developed by institute participants in this article. However, they can be classified conveniently into two general categories. The first group is characterized by a single service-learning project that involves all of the students in a given Spanish class. Many teachers focused their thematic units around tutoring and mentoring activities for Spanish-speaking children, teenagers, and adults. Some of the projects took place within their own schools or another school in the same district. Other projects were carried out in churches and community centers. Activities included being a “buddy” to a Spanish-speaking peer, tutoring children and adults in English, serving as conversation partners (sharing equal time in Spanish and English), and leading social activities. In many cases, the teacher accompanied and monitored the students as they completed their service-learning activities, especially if younger students were involved. If the teacher was not present, students were required to obtain the signature of the adult in charge as evidence of their participation. Schedules, permission slips, and assessment rubrics were created in support of these activities. In one project, high school students developed a coloring book for a children’s program at a community center (Vierling). The students worked in teams on assigned themes (transportation/travel, sports, colors, etc.), searched for vocabulary related to their themes, wrote basic sentences that could be illustrated, and produced illustrations (original drawings or clip art) for the coloring book. Assessment criteria for volunteer service included completion of the task, productive use of time, and responsible handling of assigned tasks. The final products were assessed on the basis of cooperative participation, vocabulary lists, draft and final versions of sentences and illustrations, creativity, originality, and accuracy.

The second category might be called the “shopping basket” approach to community-based learning. Many teachers favored allowing students to choose from a variety of activities, rather than designating a single project. Frequently, teachers attached point values to the various activities, with higher point values assigned to those that involved volunteerism and engagement with native speakers of Spanish. The range of activities was, of course, correlated with community resources, but the following is a representative list:

- interviewing native speakers of Spanish
- participating in Latino festivals
- conducting a food or clothing drive
- attending Spanish-language religious services
- dining in a Latino restaurant
- visiting art galleries and museums
- reading magazine and Internet articles about Latino issues
- listening to Latino music
- viewing videos about Latino issues
- shopping in a Latino market
Reflection

Although student activities did not always include volunteer service, the teachers did require student reflection as an instructional strategy. Reflective activities varied according to the level of instruction. Both oral and written formats were explored, but some type of reflection was required for both the service-learning and community-based activities. Some advanced students were asked to keep a reflective journal in which lexical/grammatical accuracy was generally not considered a key element. One teacher (Vierling) developed the following questionnaire to guide student reflection:

- Who am I?
- What are my values?
- What have I learned about myself through this experience?
- Do I have more/less understanding or empathy than I did before volunteering?
- How has this experience challenged stereotypes or prejudices that I may have had?
- Will these experiences change the way I act or think in the future?
- What happened?
- What would I change about this situation if I were in charge?
- What have I learned about this agency, these people, or the community?
- Was there failure, success, indecision, doubt, humor, frustration, happiness, sadness?
- Does this experience complement or contrast with what I am learning in class? How?
- Has learning through experience taught me more, less, or the same as the class? In what ways?

Spreading the word

A final component of the institutes included sharing information and resources with other teachers around Ohio. The institute directors and selected participants presented half-day workshops at the 2002 and 2003 annual meetings of the Ohio Foreign Language Association. During the workshops, the institute participants presented their thematic units and helped lead small-group brainstorming activities, such as:

- Divide into groups by region and generate lists of community partners and resources.
- Divide into groups by level taught and discuss preparation of students for interacting with Spanish speakers in the community.
- Divide into groups by level taught and adapt the presenters’ ideas for different levels.
- Divide into groups by level taught and discuss ways to extend the presenters’ themes and activities.
- Divide into random groups and discuss how to overcome obstacles to establishing school-community partnerships.
- Divide into random groups and discuss ways of making connections with the Spanish-speaking community.

 Evaluations of the institutes by the participants and external reviewers indicated four major outcomes: developing awareness of Latinos and Latino issues, networking with other Spanish teachers in Ohio, incorporating service-learning and community engagement into the Spanish curriculum, and organizing instruction around the Standards for Learning Spanish.
WORKS CITED


Vierling, Jeannie A. Thematic Unit for Spanish and the Spanish Speakers of Ohio, Residential Institute for Teachers, The Ohio State University, 2002.