

Customizing L2 into a Service-Learning Study Abroad Program Japanese Executives at an American Soup Kitchen

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“Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking, learning naturally results” – John Dewey

“Fifteen volunteers serve meals to the homeless at a soup kitchen.” It is effortless when one is asked to make a mental picture of this caption because Americans are known for their outstanding volunteer spirit. According to the Corporation of National Community Service (2011), 64.3 million Americans volunteered 7.9 billion hours in formal organizations in 2011. Now try to make a mental picture of this caption. “Fifteen Japanese corporate executives come to the United States to volunteer at the soup kitchen, inner-city high school gardening project, shelter for abused women, senior retirement home, and after-school program for at-risk children”. It is much harder to envision this. But inspired by Dewey’s quote and service-learning education, as an EFL teacher and former human resource development (HRD) trainer at Fuji Xerox Learning Institute, I was able to make this unconventional picture into a reality.

This paper will explain two separate but related journeys. The first is my personal journey of growing up in the United States during the height of the busing system for desegregation. It is here that I was first introduced to the spirit of volunteerism and led to the development of the second journey of taking fifteen Fuji Xerox executives to Philadelphia. It is here that ESL and service-learning were united into a customized program through a carefully set up three-step model that I will refer to as The Sandwich Model which includes briefing, volunteering, and reflecting.

MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998) mentioned situations of variables influencing willingness to communicate (WTC), for example, social situation, intergroup attitudes, and self-confidence. As MacIntyre et al. (1998) stated, the ultimate goal of the learning process should be to engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication

opportunities. These three steps of The Sandwich Model produced positive attitude, confidence, broadening perspectives, and motivation. They are all necessary for WTC, L2 competence, and intercultural awareness. Through the reflection process, the entire experience was pulled together to create further dialogue on ways of transferring

their reflections by enhancing their capacity to solve the world problems that leaders face today.

Introduction

One of the programs provided by the Fuji Xerox HRD training department was the highly selective executive management forum for executive cohorts ranging from legal, finance, R&D, and domestic sales departments. The fifteen selected members met for yearlong weekend forums to foster ongoing dialogue on the three pillars of leadership: What makes a good individual? What makes a good society? What makes a good corporation? Thereby, the dialogue challenged to deepen their knowledge, broaden their perspectives and enhance their capacity to solve the problems that leaders face. A study abroad component was included in order to add a global perspective to the dialogue.

During the development process of the study abroad program, we realized that this program needed to focus more than linguistic competence and offer more value than the numerous summer English open-enrollment programs. Also, several missed opportunities for L2 development of the executives affected motivation and self-confidence, which were necessary for WTC and L2 communicative competence in both business and social situations.

The English proficiency level of each executive varied from false beginner to low advanced, and all of them could manage in English on work related situations. First, one of the missed opportunities for L2 development was their overreliance on media and competencies other than their own, such as interpreters, Teleprompters, well-rehearsed presentations, professional translators, and bilingual subordinates. Second, although it is inevitable, the executives had limited interaction with the American non-business community and various communities with differing social-economic

status because of their shared background of growing up in an extremely homogeneous country of 99% Japanese with a literacy rate of 99%, and living in a country with 100 million people belonging to the middle class. Finally, several executives had previously attended workshops in the United States and had falsely assumed sufficient exposure to American culture, but in fact, each trip was limited to shuttling between the airport, meeting with business associates, and the hotel; and did not affiliate with members of the American community.

The study abroad concept needed to cover all of these missed opportunities through some kind of immersion into the American community. I recalled my childhood in the United States to find a more specific answer with regards to immersion.

My Journey

Now make a mental picture of this caption. “A bus full of children commutes for 40 minutes to their assigned public elementary school in the inner-city ghettos due to the city’s hope of balancing out racial inequalities”. Perhaps for people in Japan, this caption would sound unfathomable and absurd. But, this is my personal journey.

The busing system for desegregation

My neighborhood of south Denver fell under U.S. District Court mandate for Busing for Racial Balancing of 1970 in the Denver Public School district. The Busing System, as it was generally referred to, had grown monumentally across the United States. Students were bused across the district in attempting to balance the school demographics for each public school, but the busing policy choices had been made and expanded without regard to the impact on the central enterprise of schools, which is

student learning (Zars,1998) . My assigned elementary school was in northwest Denver's Hispanic community and had strikingly different demographic and socioeconomic populations. Many of the students from the school community spoke Spanish as their first language. Also, it was hard to ignore the growing crime and poverty rate that was already above the national average. At the age of seven, this sudden immersion into a new community was an eye-opening and unforgettable experience.

Desegregation within the Denver Public Schools system began in 1970 and continued until it was lifted in 1995 and labeled as an overall failure to desegregate. Zar (1988) claimed that researchers found that busing could be considered exploitation of children's time, and that students with large average times on buses report lower grades, poorer levels of fitness, fewer social activities, and poor study habits. Also, Watrus (2006) described that the participants agreed that the era for litigated desegregation was over because busing had failed to raise academic achievement of the children and court ordered racial balance caused white families to move to the suburbs (ie: white flight). While this picture of racial desegregation fueled efforts to enhance the education of the youth, it disguised the cause of the suburban sprawl that was endangering the region.

Cultural awareness derived from the busing system

Contrary to the controversy of the prolonged Busing System and white flight, however, I saw it as a positive and an enlightening experience. Although I saw the struggles of L2 English learners as they tried to integrate with the mainstream students, I also saw ways that helped to alleviate those tensions. Wells (1981) stated that the momentum for bilingual education derived from the 1973 Supreme Court decision in

Keyes v. Denver School District which addressed the language needs of desegregated Hispanic students. The Court stated that a meaningful desegregation plan must not only physically integrate Hispanic students, but must also help them to be proficient in English.

My school poured all of its resources into its strong English as a Second Language (ESL) program. At the same time, the school provided Spanish language classes and Hispanic cultural experiences to mainstream L1 students to bridge the intercultural communication barrier. This followed closely with what MacIntyre et al. (1998) points out on the fear of assimilation of integrativeness as one of the variables of influencing WTC. "A minority group member risks assimilation into a majority group when the individual has acquired the language and feel that their linguistic and cultural heritage was vulnerable and may resist learning English. However, when a majority group member learns to use the language of a minority group, there is far less risk to native cultural identity and, therefore, less resistance". This dual learning approach by both the majority and minority group helped to take away fears of assimilation and therefore, motivating them to learn English.

My school encouraged dual intercultural awareness through second language programs and it worked as the L1 and L2 students became closer. L2 students were motivated to integrate into the mainstream classes. I believe this was the first time I had dreamed of becoming an English teacher.

Volunteer programs for the L2 community

Since the 1980s, eight million immigrants arrived in the U.S. and poured two million students into the nation's schools. These newcomers changed American schools from biracial to multiracial, multicultural, and

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multilingual institutions (Ascher, 1993). As a child I was also introduced to several other ethnic cultures inside America's melting pot, but with that wave, also came the understanding of socioeconomic disparities, and the visible struggles of the immigrant community.

The school, churches, and the local community organized many opportunities for youth involvement. I volunteered to help on the food, clothing, food stamps, and holiday gift drives. Through community service, one can acquire a sense that they can make a difference and a concern for society's welfare and volunteer work can be a key building block of self-development; change their values and became more mature and caring people (Youniss, 1995). The active volunteer experience led me to believe that volunteerism and ESL were connected. I found ways of linking both of these and spent several years as a literacy volunteer in ESL classes at various California public schools. Putting together my experience of cultural awareness and volunteerism, this led me to the development of the underlying concept: ESL based service-learning program to raise cultural consciousness. This is their journey.

The Executives' Journey

I researched several U.S. universities and locations to customize this program. I came across the expertise of the English Language Program at the University of Pennsylvania. Also, Harris Wofford, the former U.S. Senator and head of Corporation for National Service said, "Service-learning is big. It's growing, and it's taking root, and Philadelphia has led the way, becoming a model of service learning, which helped create a new generation of active-duty citizens" (Moore, 1999). In fact, the Philadelphia School District became the first in the nation to make service-learning a part of its academic requirements for promotion and graduation.

The Sandwich Model: briefing-actual task-reflection

With the expertise of the ELP staff, the curriculum was set up in a three step process to help the executives reflect and pull together all of the volunteer programs and L2 challenges that they may face. I refer to the three step process of Briefing-Volunteering- Reflecting as 'The Sandwich Model'. The briefing stage was represented by the first stage or the 'bottom layer of the bread', the volunteer activity was represented by middle stage or the 'meat of the sandwich', and the reflecting stage was represented by the third stage or the 'top layer of the bread'. Like building a sandwich, there were no shortcuts and all three steps were needed to make the perfect combination.

Stage 1: The Briefing Stage (The bottom layer of bread)

First, the bottom bread of the sandwich was the classroom briefing stage that took place prior to the volunteer task. This stage was similar to the preparatory stage in service-learning curriculums. As Sheffield (2003) mentioned in service-learning education, reflection before service may seem a contradiction, but we commonly reflect on and use prior knowledge and experience. In preparing for service work, students recollect, propose, hypothesize, predict and make judgments. In the same manner, the briefing took place allowing brainstorming, activating schemata in relation to the home country and prior knowledge of the volunteer organization, and growing anticipation to the actual volunteer work that followed.

Authentic and current reading materials on the volunteer organization were chosen such as pamphlets, mission statements, and relevant websites. The language was then dissected into manageable chunks to learn new and review vocabulary and build on lexical competence. According to Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, Thurrell (1995), sociocultural competence were cultural

factors of the knowledge of the target community and therefore, data on demographics, cultural history, and socioeconomic situations were analyzed and briefed according to each volunteer organization. The briefing stage increased anticipation toward meeting the target community by identifying and affiliating with those members. According to MacIntyre et al, (1998) positive attitudes toward the L2 group had been widely implicated in L2 learning motivation and achievement. The willingness to communicate model (1998) postulated that willingness to speak was determined not only by learners themselves but also by the situation they were in.

Stage 2: The Volunteering Stage (The meat of the sandwich)

Five different volunteer activities were offered. These organizations were carefully selected in order to a sample of different targeted age groups of the community: elementary school aged children, high school students, single mothers, senior citizens, and the homeless population of various age ranges.

1. The Soup Kitchen. The soup kitchen served free nutritious meals every night to the homeless and low income families of the Greater Philadelphia area. The soup kitchens were funded or managed by NPO organizations, universities, charities, churches and donations. There were many similar soup kitchens mainly in inner-cities across the nation.

Volunteer activity: The actual experience included food preparation, washing dishes, lunchroom set-up, and serving food. The executives talked to the volunteer staff and wanted to learn more information due to the anticipation from the briefing. After the round of serving, two executives sat down next at the tables to meet the homeless acquaintances and initiated interaction. Other executives played with the children after dinner. All of the executives engaged in natural conversation

in their L2 without inhibition. According to MacIntyre et al, (1998) personality patterns had been shown to facilitate language learning and intergroup communication. For example, the intuitive-feeling types showed high levels of L2 learning achievement, presumably because they were adept at forming interpersonal bonds and inferring meaning from conversation. It was interesting to see the executives take their first volunteer activity with such inhibition and self-confidence.

2. Simon Gratz High School Urban Gardening Project. This inner-city high school was listed as persistently dangerous based on the number of dangerous incidents in which weapons possession or violence results to an arrest. Snyder and Purcell (2011) found recent statistics recorded at this school with 32 assaults on students, 13 on teachers, and 5 on school police regardless of the metal detector at school. Despite the high school's violent track record, the school was active in service-learning education, a requirement for graduation, and to teach strategy in real-world problem-solving of community needs. The high school students set up urban gardening programs to plant flowers and clean up the neighboring open spaces.

Volunteer Activity: After an initial tour of the school and grounds, the executives helped with planting flowers, de-weeding in urban gardens, and sliced wood chips used for landscaping. This physically demanding volunteer work struck an emotional chord with some of the executives who had sons or daughters of the same age. The violent learning environment and the number of school police to sort out disorderly conduct was a daily struggle and affected student's focus on learning. The executives had a chance to ask questions and talk to some of the student volunteers. The executives were truly impressed with their maturity and sense of self. Despite the violent environment of

the school, these high school students had a remarkable outlook on life and their positive ambitions to better their community.

3. Shelter for Abused Women and Children. This shelter provided emergency service for abused women and children. They provide the basics: shelter, food, clothing, medical care, mental health; as well as, Education: job training, nutrition, child care, skills to help lead the residents to self-sufficiency.

Volunteer Activity: The Japanese executives prepared lunch in the kitchen, stocked food, and folded origami with children in the parent-child program within the shelter. They talked with the volunteer staff and asked many questions. They had a chance to talk to volunteers and found out that many volunteers were former residents of the shelter themselves and decided to return to help others in similar situations. The shelter received funding from public, private, and individual donations.

4. Senior Retirement Community. This was a luxurious senior citizen community for affluent seniors. This center had a volunteer program in which the seniors, the hospital, and the community came together. The seniors tutored students in schoolwork, children and volunteers provided activities and computer classes. Also, the seniors made large donations to several agencies and organizations: The Cancer Society, United Way, Opera House Tours, Alzheimer's Association, and hospitals.

Volunteer Activity: The Japanese executives sang songs, wrote names in kanji, and talked with the seniors. Unlike the other volunteer programs, this center was for the affluent citizens of Philadelphia. It emphasized that the upper class citizens also volunteered and made large donations to organizations. In exchange, services for other areas are promoted. This two-way volunteer program added to further insight on American volunteerism.

5. After-school Program for At-Risk Children. This afterschool care was for elementary

school-aged children that were at risk of dropping out of school, at risk of running into a gang or drug related problems, or at risk of family abuse. Fifteen organizations and several public school teachers volunteered at this afterschool and summer program. Field trips were often integrated into the program to help children see other parts of the city to encourage them to stay in school and to remain focused on moving up and out by hard work and education.

Volunteer Activity: The elementary school children were very excited with their fifteen new friends from Japan. They were all eager to communicate with them. The executives accompanied them on a field trip to the Japanese Tea house and gardens at Fairmont Park. The situation created WTC and desire to communicate under situated antecedents as research in social psychology reveals that affiliation often occurs when persons who are physical nearby” (MacIntyre et al,1998). These children were very friendly and often held hands and hugged the executives. The executives explained the Japanese culture of the tea house and had a chance to bond with the children by showing them the gardens.

Stage 3: Reflecting (The top layer of bread)

The reflecting stage was the most essential part of the three stages. Dewey (1933) explained that there were two kinds of experiential processes which led to learning: trial and error; and the reflective activity. Dewey believed that it was this kind of activity that enabled effective problem-solving to take place and that it improved the effectiveness of learning. This reflective activity for the executives was essential because of their responsibilities to transfer their knowledge into practice and because “only through understanding reflection completely and correctly could students and teacher decide how the academic skills were to be applied to the community problem (Sheffield, 2003)”.

After the half or full day experience at each volunteer location, the executives returned to the classroom for this reflection stage facilitated by the ELP staff. I participated as an interpreter because, for this program only, executives could opt to use their L1 in order not to interrupt the flow of thought, disturb the reflection, or the internalization process. The reflecting session allowed the executives to open dialogue and pull together all of their individual experiences and individual thoughts into a collective discussion.

Conclusion

This paper explained the customization of L2 into a service-learning study abroad program for Japanese executives. This program was ideal for the executives, but it would be just as valuable and transferable to high school and university students, and other business men and women.

Volunteer work in itself does not create intercultural understanding in fact, it could cause the language learners to feel extreme anxiety and a fear of assimilation. The program must be set up in a service-learning education approach with three distinct stages: briefing, volunteering, and reflecting.

Now try to make a mental picture of this: “Several hundred Japanese high school students, college students, teachers, and company employees follow suit by volunteering at the American soup kitchen!!” - Perhaps, this is your journey.

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