



# An Interdisciplinary Approach to Language Learning through Community Engagement

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## Abstract

*Research overwhelming demonstrates that students learn, comprehend, and retain concepts much more effectively by actively participating in lessons rather than by passively absorbing them. The conversion of lessons into meaningful and relevant community engagement projects offers students experiences that start them on a journey toward linguistic excellence and multicultural competency. The more students understand a community with whom they are engaging, the more they will want to become immersed in that community, speak their language, eat their food, enjoy their music, and more importantly, befriend, understand, and respect the people within that community. Navigating successfully through the projects helps students acquire important leadership skills while becoming linguistically competent and globally minded. In an era where diversity and cultural understanding is critical, it is incumbent upon language professors to go beyond the signifiers of the vocabulary and the grammar and immerse students in situations they will experience in real life. Language professors should ask themselves this question, “Will my students remember the vocabulary and the grammar taught to them from a textbook and a chalkboard or will they remember the satisfaction they felt at being able to employ the class content in the resolution of a real-life problem?” This paper will help answer that question by highlighting three major community-based language projects created at Penn State Berks. It will illustrate how the connections between course content and projects are made and how the outcomes of those projects help to continuously mold language instruction on our campus. It will conclude by demonstrating how those projects were adapted and converted to virtual opportunities when the world was suddenly confronted with the Covid-19 pandemic.*

**Keywords:** *Enhancing Student Engagement, Project-Based Learning.*

## 1. Introduction

Motivation is the cornerstone of a successful language learning classroom [1 Jones,2020] [2 Alshenqeeti,2018]. Class materials and activities must be fresh, exciting, and *relevant*. They must provide relevance for the student seeking to apply the classroom content to the outside world. Enter Community Engagement, which integrates meaningful and relevant community service with instruction and reflection. The learning derives “from active engagement with the community and work on a real-world problem. Reflection and experiential learning strategies underpin the process, and the service is linked to the academic discipline” [3 Bringle and Hatcher, 1999].

Penn State Berks (PSB) is located just outside the city of Reading. Since 2010, the Hispanic/Latino population in Reading has been steadily rising. Statistics indicate that 60% of Reading’s population is now Hispanic/Latino [4 Malone, 2016]. Hispanics account for 85% of the population in the Reading School District. [5 Public School Review, 2020]. The Spanish department at PSB has created over 17 different community engagement experiences that linguistically and culturally complement every Spanish class taught on campus. This paper describes the three programs that offer the highest degree of interdisciplinary collaboration.

### 2.1 Migrant Education After School Program

Since the early twentieth century, Latino immigrants from Mexico, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic have been relocating to the city of Reading to work in the mushroom fields and manufacturing jobs [6 Garcia, 1997]. As manufacturing jobs declined, workers found work in neighboring county nurseries, fruit processing facilities, dairies and poultry and beef farms. This type of work is very often seasonal, so families are forced to migrate from county to county in search of the next seasonal opportunity which means their school age children may attend as many as four or five schools in one academic year. The Migrant Education Program (MEP) exists to provide instructional support and services to students whose education is interrupted by their migrant lifestyle. Students from PSB served as tutors for the program.



Prior to the start of the tutoring sessions, Spanish language students who were also enrolled in civic engagement and social justice classes analyzed the history of the program and how it came to be an integral part of the Reading School District. Spanish students taking education classes assisted by providing tutoring tips as well as age appropriate lesson plans. PSB students tutored the children in reading, math, language arts and other general homework assignments. In turn, the students learned first-hand about the plight of Hispanics in Reading and their struggles to obtain an education.

To participate in the project, students had to commit to a minimum of one afternoon per week, for three consecutive weeks; however, several students committed to tutoring the entire semester. Those who stopped after three weeks cited conflicts with their jobs and/or their participation on a sports team. Those that stayed the entire semester indicated that they had created such a strong bond with the children that they did not want to disappoint their tutees by leaving them before the semester had ended.

For the Spanish language students, tutoring the children became an exciting extension of the classroom. They applied the vocabulary and grammar they learned in the classroom to a real-life setting and spoke Spanish in real time with real people. A successful community engagement project should challenge students to perform outside of their comfort zone, but only insofar as the challenge is motivating, not frustrating [7 Lear & Abbott, 2009] [8 Knouse & Salgado Robles, 2015]. Thus, the beginning language students were tasked with helping first graders solve simple math problems. This allowed students to feel comfortable and increase their self-confidence. As the semester progressed and students advanced in their Spanish studies, they were able to tutor the children in more complex assignments such as language arts and help them read and write simple sentences. Language students who were at the intermediate or advanced levels of the Spanish, assisted the children in subjects that required more in-depth conversation such as geography and science.

The tutoring experience afforded the language students repeated and individual oral/aural practice. In addition, they received relevant writing practice by submitting a reflection composition after each third week rotation. The compositions provided a unit of measure to compare their progress in Spanish against those who were not in Spanish community engagement classes. Surveys administered to participants indicated that the project motivated them to use the target language more often and more willingly than those who were not enrolled in community engagement class. Out of approximately 50 participants per year, surveyed for the past five years, 48% reported that they were very satisfied at how the program increased their comfort level in speaking Spanish, that the experience helped them understand and empathize with the migrant children, and that they would be willing to repeat the experience in the future. These results point to motivation and relevance as important factors in creating a positive attitude toward learning and applying Spanish outside of the classroom.

## **2.2 Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges 2**

*Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges 2* is a collaborative project between Penn State Berks, the Reading School District, and Latino artists from the Reading Community that utilizes the arts and humanities to explore themes of discrimination, cultural poverty, health, and community re-entry. It is a semester long project that culminates in an evening celebration of multicultural dance performances, live music, spoken word, child created art, and live portrait painting. The project represents community-based learning at its best, exemplifying the promotion of intercultural competence through an experiential exchange [9 Zapata, 2011].

The project increases cross-disciplinary teaching and collaboration as evidenced by the various English, Spanish, History, Criminal Justice, Civic Engagement, African American studies, and Rehabilitation and Human Services that participate in the project. Working with Latino community organizations increases our students' understanding of diversity, inclusion/exclusion, and marginalization. The participants involved in the project had an opportunity to design, interact, perform, report, record, discuss and learn, and most importantly, "be involved in creative, progressive change in [our] communities" [10 Dewald 2015]. Following the model set forth by Hatcher, Bringle and Hahn [11 2017], this collaboration of multicultural experiences and issues embodies inclusivity, creates a message of social justice awareness, advances the awareness of critical issues in our community, and enhances teaching and research outcomes.

The impact this project has on students in Spanish language and classes is immense. This project provides a total immersion experience in which students engage in the target language and the culture of the Latino community. Whether serving as a bilingual ambassador the night of the event, greeting the spectators, distributing the program booklets, participating in rehearsals, running the art



competition, translating the program booklet, painting with children of incarcerated parents to create the art show, or performing a bilingual spoken word number, language students are continuously deploying the four basic skills of language learning: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In-depth class discussions and reflection papers, in Spanish, provide important outlets for students express their emotional reactions to the project. This program provides powerful, real-life lessons that cannot possibly be taught from a textbook [12 Moreno-López, Ramos-Sellman, Miranda-Aldaco, & Gomis Quinto, 2017].

Approximately 80 Penn State Berks students participated in this program. Their reflection papers inform us that for 100% of the participants, the project created a positive change in attitude toward the way they viewed Latinos and formed a better understanding of the Spanish language and culture. Students, community partners and spectators were surveyed to measure the impact of the program and its culminating event. Out of the 200 total people surveyed (students, community, and spectators), 100 % indicated that the semester long project created a strong and positive impact on all involved and that it was “uplifting and empowering.” 50% of participants found the experience to be life altering. 100% of the students indicated they would be happy to participate in the program again.

### **2.3 Anti-Litter Campaign**

The Schuylkill River Trail and Bare Park are commonly frequented by Latino neighborhood children. PSB created an anti-litter campaign to keep the areas green, safe, and usable. The campaign consisted of several sustainable activities: a designated cleanup “day” that occurred twice a year, once the fall and once in spring; a spring nature festival and a fall educational Fun-Day Fair at the Olivet Boys and Girls Club to highlight the importance of the park and the trail. English students developed a schedule of neighborhood meetings to discuss and promote the campaign. Communication Arts and Science students provided the publicity for the meetings and the campaign itself. The Environmental Sciences students informed residents and participants how to properly recycle. Biology students tested the river water and studied the birds that lived along the trail. Since the residents of the area were primarily Spanish speaking, it was essential that Spanish students be present at all the events to provide translation and interpretation. They served as language ambassadors to Spanish speaking families who assisted with the campaign and translated the campaign materials into Spanish.

The project was well suited for the content taught in the Spanish Intermediate Level because half of the readings and the classified vocabulary found in their textbook dealt with health and wellness, environmental awareness, and civic responsibility. Since the course content could be tied directly to the project, a service-learning section of Intermediate Level Spanish was created. Students were given a choice to either take a “regular” Spanish class or to enroll in the service-learning section. Out of 75 students, 24 of them enrolled in the service-learning class. Incorporating service-learning into a course requires thoughtful pre-planning and thorough follow-up. The service activity is not an additional component, but an alternative way to teach course concepts. Successful learning and effective community contributions depend upon a well-integrated package of syllabus, orientation, reflection, and assessment [13 Ballard and Barry, 2009]. The syllabus clearly outlined the expectations of the service-learning course. Not only would students have to be engaged in community activities, but they would also be expected to create the content for the festival and the fun-day fair.

Since the textbook provided the context for the project, their progress in the language could be monitored by regular classroom assessments such as tests and writing assignments. Those that favorably viewed their role in the project performed better than those who did not. They invested more time in learning the vocabulary, practicing the grammar, and understanding the readings that dealt with environment. They also participated more in class and worked steadily toward the success of the campaign.

It was, without a doubt, an ambitious project. However, out of the 24 students surveyed in the Intermediate Spanish class, more than half the students reported it was a positive experience. Those that viewed it as a negative experience cited reasons such as “took too much time” and “interfered too much with other classes.” About 96% of the students felt that the project was an effective way for them to advance in the Spanish language.

### **3. The switch to virtual engagement**

As this paper has illustrated, using the target language in a rich and meaningful way with heritage speakers in a service-learning setting can increase student motivation and productivity in the



study a foreign language [14 Barrenche and Ramos-Flores, 2013]. With the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, our in-person programs came to an abrupt halt. At first, professors and students were all-consuming in learning how to transfer the traditional, in-person educational experiences into remote instruction. However, once everyone adjusted to the new reality and had time to think outside of a zoom call, creativity rose once again. Obviously, The Migrant Education After School Tutoring Program could no longer function as it did in-person. To continue a relationship with the program, PSB created a Virtual Bilingual Storytelling Program in its place. Students selected short and simple readings readily available in both English and Spanish on the Internet, rehearsed them, and recorded themselves performing a dramatized reading of the story. Other students collected the individual readings and turned them into one continuous video, with an introduction that provided context to what the children would be watching. The video was then made available on a YouTube channel, accessible to anyone with an Internet connection.

The Breaking Barriers Building Bridges program was the most difficult to replicate in a remote environment. However, participants of the program created an alternative. They contacted several Latino community leaders and asked them to participate in a series of public service videos that could be broadcast to the campus and community alike. To date they have created and recorded bilingual videos such as Voter Registration Information, Dominican Cooking Demonstrations, Caribbean Dance Lessons, and a Post- Election Reflection.

The anti-litter campaign had to completely recreate itself. Instead of in-person cleanups, festivals, and fairs, the students now provide important translation services to the city of Reading for pamphlets that they distribute to the public on issues ranging from sanitation to public health.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The in-person projects described herein have been employed in Spanish classes at Penn State Berks for the past five years and will continue to be offered for as long as student and community interest exists. Based on students' enthusiastic willingness to convert the programs to virtual platforms, it is reasonable to conclude that these programs are a successful tool in transferring the old-fashioned, rote language teaching methods to contemporary real-life experiences [15 Philp & Duchesne, 2016]. They provide the meaningful and relevant experiences that today's students seek in applying classroom content to real life situations. When students are motivated, they become more productive. Not only have PSB students become more proficient in using their language skills outside the classroom, but they have also become more civic minded and culturally sensitive. As evidenced from the students' proactive reaction to the pandemic, the interdisciplinary approach has also taught them to think more of just themselves, molding them into responsible and global minded citizens that will create tomorrow's positive and equitable communities.

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