College Students as Tutors:
Learning from the Latino Community of Adams County

Margarita Elorriaga
Gettysburg College

Abstract: During the spring 2005 semester, Gettysburg College Spanish 305 students visited local Latino migrant families on a weekly basis to provide basic computer training and ESL classes as part of a study on how computer training of Latino migrant parents affects K–2 Children’s reading skills. In this descriptive, interpretative and theoretical case study, Gettysburg College students acted as tutors and visited Latino migrant homes to deliver IMPACCT (Integrated Migrant Parent and Child Computer Training) to eight limited-English-proficient Latino migrant families. This paper shows the many academic, social, and cultural benefits that teaching Latino/migrant parents brought to Gettysburg College students. Students developed strong relationships with families and improved their Spanish skills and cultural awareness while helping the families to support their children’s use of computers to increase their reading skills.

Key Words: Adams County, PA, Latino migrant families, service learning, service-learning Spanish class

Introduction

Many higher education institutions, such as Gettysburg College, are dedicated to providing opportunities for students to participate in service learning activities. Along with the many service learning projects that the college offers, such as Community Development in Nicaragua, Poverty and Public Policy in Washington, D.C. and Health Center at the University of Maryland Medical Center, it also offers many courses that incorporate a service-learning component. The Spanish 305 class, Service-Learning Project in the Hispanic Community of Adams County, is such a class. Throughout Spanish 305’s fifteen-year existence, students in the class have worked with Latino/migrant and former migrant families, teaching them basic English skills and helping them to adapt to American culture. The Spanish 305 instructor’s informal observations and college students’ reflections indicate that working with Latino families brings both the students and the families many benefits. Although Hellebrandt (2006) reports that service–learning research advances teaching and advising, Bringle, Phillips, Hudson (2004) indicate that college classes with service learning components have not been sufficiently researched and their benefits have not been fully recognized. The present paper addresses this problem by studying the student benefits related to the Spanish 305 class: Service-Learning Project in the Hispanic Community of Adams County.

The incorporation of service-learning activities in the Gettysburg College Spanish courses has been a response by Spanish instructors to both the continuous needs of the new Latino population in the county and the appearance of opportunities for Spanish students to interact with the increasing Latino population of Adams County, PA, where Gettysburg College is located. For the last 15 years there has been a significant increase in the Latino population across the country in non-traditional Latino areas, such as Adams County. According to the Pennsylvania State Data Center, in 2004 the estimated population of Latinos in Adams County was 4,530 (4.5%) of the county’s entire population of 99,749. This is a significant increase from 1990, when the total population of Adams County was 78,274, and only 1.6% (1,216) was Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). Most of the Latino population in Adams County is composed of...
Mexican migrant or former migrant families. The Department of Education, Migrant Office defines migrant students as students who have traveled with their family in search of fishing, agricultural or agricultural-related work within the last three years, crossing school district, state or country lines (US Department of Education, No Child Left Behind Web Site, 2006).

Migrant parents are usually characterized as having low levels of schooling and being a very hard working, low-income group with limited or no access to technology and its benefits. Latino migrant parents could take advantage of the benefits that the use of a home computer may bring to their lives if appropriate training is provided. Due to the decrease in mobility of migrant families, several local educational agencies and educational institutions, such as Gettysburg College, can now provide migrant and former migrant families with free computers so they can use them as a tool to promote learning skills at home. The majority of migrant parents, however, do not know how to use these computers nor how to help their children use them appropriately. In order for Latino migrant parents to take advantage of these computers and help their children increase their reading skills in their own homes, training on how to use them is necessary. Gettysburg College Spanish students can provide this training, which places them in contact with real-life Spanish in a situation where they can learn from a culture that is very different from their own.

This paper documents the social, academic and cultural benefits that Gettysburg College Spanish 305 students obtained while participating as parent tutors as part of a larger study during the spring of 2005. During the study, college students implemented a parent-computer-training program for Latino migrant families in an effort to help them improve the reading literacy skills of their children. Parent-computer-training is defined as the use of the Integrated Migrant Parent and Child Computer Training (IMPACCT), a home based curriculum that includes basic computer skills, the use of early childhood reading software and online resources for Latino parents.

Spanish 305 is a service-learning class whose main goal is to provide service to the Latino community of Adams County. In this class students work a minimum of 24 hours with a Latino family throughout the semester to help the family learn English, satisfy its needs and generally acculturate to American society. Students learn basic English-as-a-Second-Language teaching techniques, read about the immigrant and migrant experience and experience the Latino culture and language first-hand. Students usually report working many more hours than the required 24.

During the spring 2005 semester, Spanish 305 students were also trained in the IMPACCTo (Spanish version of IMPACCT) program during class time and were closely monitored by the researcher who was also the instructor of the class. Even though Latino migrant families benefited immensely from this study, this paper concentrates on the benefits students received by being tutors, or maestros, as they were called by the participating Latino/migrant families.

Research Question

The study tried to answer the following research question: How does being a tutor of parents benefit college students academically, socially and culturally? In order to answer the research question qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Data came from observations, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, students’ journals, final papers, and surveys to assess the effects of service learning among college students.

Service Learning in Higher Education

Gelman, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, and Kerrigan (2001) define service learning as an educational methodology wherein community service and specific academic learning objectives are combined. Participating students in service-learning activities provide a community service as part of their course work, learn about the context where they are doing the community service and reflect upon their work and learning. Higher education institutions are moving from a purely traditional role of teaching to including a new emphasis on active learning, and service learning is part of this new emphasis. McCabe and Miller (2003) indicate that, during the last ten years,
there has been a national call for volunteer service where colleges have encouraged students to serve and learn and have made available opportunities for them to do so. McCabe and Miller add that results from cross-age tutorial programs show that service learning benefits both tutors and tutees. For example, children can increase their reading achievement by participating in service learning programs while college education students get direct experience working with children. Thomas (2004) agrees with McCabe and Miller, indicating that at Pomona College, 70% of students volunteer, even though students are not required to do service learning. Pomona students volunteer in all kinds of programs that range from cleaning the beach to teaching with certified teachers. The benefits that volunteers obtain are many, including gaining self-confidence and learning to deal with new situations. Beebe and De Costa (1993) present a model of experience-based learning in which the University of Santa Clara developed a partnership with its local community: The Santa Clara University Eastside Project. In this project, students apply the knowledge and skills gained from their classrooms in their neighborhoods. Both the community and the students begin to break stereotypes and build cultural bridges by gaining a deeper understanding of each other’s culture.

Raschio, Jorge, and López (2005) agree that service learning provides many benefits. Service learning allows students to engage with subject matter and support a variety of different learning styles. Service learning provides students with a sense of personal involvement, and improves their observation and research skills. Students who are active in service learning projects have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences by writing, reading, speaking, listening and understanding the community and different social and political issues.

As the incorporation of service-learning projects increases across the Higher Education curriculum, a growing number of Spanish instructors are incorporating service learning into their courses in order to develop Spanish oral comprehension, conversation and cultural appreciation in their students (Weldon and Trautmann, 2003). Hellebrandt, Arries and Varona (2004) provide teachers and community members with the resources and tools needed for planning, implementing and evaluating service-learning community partnerships in Spanish and Portuguese in a handbook called Juntos. Mollica, Nuessel and Cedeño (2004) also explore the emerging literature on incorporating service-learning projects into the Spanish curriculum.

Placing students in direct contact with native speakers of Spanish provides opportunities for practicing Spanish in real situations. Hellebrandt and Varona (1999) present 18 monographs on service learning that show the potential and benefits of service learning in Spanish classes. In one of these 18 monographs, Varas (1999) indicates that by incorporating service learning into her Spanish Culture and Conversation class her students not only improved their Spanish language skills, but also developed good relationships with Latino migrant children whom they tutored. Her college students gained not only academic benefits but they also increased their level of integration to the real world.

In the Gettysburg College Spanish Department, several professors have incorporated service learning since 1991 in different ways, such as working with migrant Latino children in a pre-K school, at El Centro (an afternoon program for children) and with Latino families in their homes. Elorriaga (2003) reports that in an effort to address constant mobility, switching jobs and/or work shifts by Hispanic/Latino migrant families, Gettysburg College students from three Spanish classes and one political science class worked with Migrant Even Start families, helping them to learn English and understand and adjust to American society. Instructors, students, and families report that the benefits that both the students and the families received were invaluable. Families improved in their English language skills and Gettysburg College students practiced their Spanish skills and experienced the Latino culture first-hand, especially the role of the Latino women in both Mexican and American societies.

Methodology: A Case Study

A descriptive, interpretive and theoretical case study was used in this investigation to
answer the research question. Qualitative and quantitative data were obtained from observations, surveys, focus groups, questionnaires, interviews, journals, and college students’ final papers.

The participants were sixteen female students enrolled in Spanish 305 at Gettysburg College. The age of the students ranged between 19 and 22 years. All students had completed the equivalent of four or more semesters of college Spanish and all came from middle-class and upper-socioeconomic Anglo-Saxon families. Their participation was completely voluntary; they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. The principal goal for Spanish 305 students was to allow them to practice their Spanish and learn first-hand about a subculture of the United States that is strongly represented in the local community surrounding their campus. Two college students were assigned to each Latino migrant family. Four of the eight families were previous participants in the Spanish 305 class; therefore they had experience working with Gettysburg College students.

Students visited the homes of their assigned families on a weekly basis for at least 24 hours during the semester. In addition to the weekly visits, focus groups took place two times during the study. During these focus group meetings, participant college students had an opportunity to share with Latino migrant parents their experiences and suggestions for improving the computer training program. These meetings were conducted at Gettysburg College. Spanish 202 intermediate students played games and read to the children, allowing Latino/migrant parents to meet with Spanish 305 students.

Concerns expressed by students and parents, accomplishments, tasks and activities were observed and recorded by the instructor. Observations provided data on the setting and the roles of children, parents and college students as they interacted and communicated during the implementation of the IMPACCTo program and during focus groups.

Gettysburg College students’ training was an ongoing process throughout the entire semester. As instructed during class, all of the students tried to dedicate at least one hour a week to teaching the families computer skills following the IMPACCTo program; unfortunately, this was not possible at the beginning of the study. As anticipated, all families had many needs to which the students dedicated most of their time. Those needs included such things as taking their family to get glasses for the children or translating the infinite number of papers that came to the homes in English. For example, college students were constantly translating school documents, such as school activities, homework and notes about specific problems some children were having at school. Some students took parents to different school activities enabling children to participate in special school activities such as the Valentine’s Day breakfast and Arts Day events. Some college students reported helping families to complete job forms, to pay doctor and hospital bills and to look for information on the Internet related to finding jobs. As the time went by, students dedicated more time to teaching families basic computer skills.

College students not only helped families by tutoring them with their computer and English skills or by taking them to the doctor’s office, all of them became good friends with their families. One student wrote in her final paper,

I also think another important influence of this project is the friendly and mutual benefit of the college student and migrant family relationship because it is unusual for them to have much contact with us. I think it expands their horizons as well as ours to learn more about another culture and build a solid relationship with people from extremely different backgrounds. This may be the most influential part because I think it is really the relationship that they will remember as impacting and helpful with English as well as teaching cultural norms and practices. The computer games were helpful and allowed us all to interact and learn from each other in the process.

Results

Data obtained from observations, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, students’ journals, final papers, and surveys indicate that being a parent tutor benefited students
Academically, students progressed in the following ways:

1. Students practiced their Spanish skills in a context different from the regular classroom. Students stated that speaking with a native person from Mexico is something that is very valuable, especially after returning from a semester abroad. At the end of the semester, students' Spanish speaking skills improved as shown in the discussions held in class and class presentations.

2. They learned a lot of vocabulary that otherwise they would not have learned in a regular Spanish class, thus improving their performance in other Spanish classes that they were taking during the semester.

3. They improved their ability to communicate in Spanish by using everyday vocabulary and learning new words. Students indicated that no other Spanish class allowed them to practice speaking and listening more than Spanish 305. Students and families indicated that Gettysburg College students became more fluent in Spanish.

4. Students gained more confidence in Spanish and felt more comfortable speaking, listening and expressing themselves much better in Spanish. “This confidence spread to my Spanish classes and I began to participate and engage in more discussion, especially in my Spanish senior seminar. I also began communicating more with Spanish teachers outside of class and conversing with classmates in Spanish,” a participant student declared in her final paper.

5. They experienced situations that relate to other (not Spanish) classes. One student emphasized that participating in a service-learning experience had helped her in her anthropology and sociology classes. She was able to use events with her family as examples in her classes while at the same time learning why the mother of her family was acting and feeling timid and reserved.

6. They learned how to teach others. One student indicated that being a parent tutor helped her to think in different ways. She also was constantly thinking about how to make learning fun for the family. Four students were seriously considering going into education; this experience gave them an idea of what it would be like to teach someone another language. Students commented that, although teaching can be difficult, it is very rewarding and worthwhile in the end. One student stated, “This experience has been worthwhile and rewarding for me, both as a student and person. It has helped me continue to practice and improve my proficiency in Spanish. I honestly can say that [from] this opportunity during my four-year college career, I will take away lifelong lessons and insights. Because of this class, I know that I want to pursue a profession in the field of education.”

Socially, students progressed in the following ways:

1. Students gained confidence using Spanish in different social situations and with a variety of ages. One student declared: “I have a more accepting perspective of their [the families'] cultural values and I think social interactions with diverse populations are extremely beneficial.”

2. They improved in different skills, such as organization and leadership skills and their ability to take control of different situations. At the end of semester presentations, students showed more organization skills and they seemed to be more confident.

3. Students had an incomparable experience that made a difference in the lives of the families that they tutored. A student indicated:

I am allowed to escape from the “Gettysburg Bubble” and remember that there is a world besides academics and education which are lingering upon us. My experiences tutoring have made me become a well rounded individual: I have improved my Spanish, I have contributed to the community, I have
helped others assimilate into our culture, and I have made new friends. By having programs like this
at the College, stereotypes, racism, and simply a misunderstanding of social differences will be
eliminated.

4. Students formed relationships with members of the local community. Students attended
the children's school functions and drove parents to places; most of the students
became part of the family.

5. They improved their social skills and reduced their awkwardness with people they do
not know well. One student stated that she usually has great difficulty speaking to
people she does not know very well, but working with a family forced her to com-
municate and interact.

6. Students served others. College students felt the reward of helping others. A student
wrote in her final paper: “This experience impacted me because it really brought to life
how inhibiting a language barrier really is. The value of this project has been very
profound for me personally in many ways. I appreciate more than anything the gratitude
I gain internally from helping others who truly are in need and who show that they
benefit from my efforts.”

Culturally, students progressed in the following ways:

1. They learned about the Latino culture first hand and made a connection with what was
read in class. Students stated that working with local families added a beneficial
dimension of applying book work to real-world work.

2. They improved their communication skills and gained more confidence when talking to
people from another culture and language.

At the end of the semester college students responded to a survey about their participation
in the Spanish 305 class. Students rated statements on a Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to
5 = strongly agree.

Table 1 shows the mean of the student’s responses. Most students indicated that they
strongly agree (mean 4.9) with the statement that they can make a difference in their community
and that they feel more responsible serving their community (mean 4.8). Students saw that their
families improved on a daily basis. Most students indicated that the most rewarding aspect of
their participation in this class was to see their families’ progress. Most of the students also
agreed that they felt the Spanish 305 class helped them to become more aware of the needs of the
Latino/migrant population (mean 4.8). At the same time they indicated that teaching Latino/
migrant families had benefited them academically (mean 4.1), socially (mean 4.4) and had helped
them to define their personal strengths and weakness (mean 4.1). The majority of students (mean
4.6) indicated that the community participation aspect of the Spanish 305 class helped them to see
how the subject matter they learned can be used in everyday life, while the community
participation helped them (mean 4.1) to understand the lectures and reading in their course.
Students (mean 4.1) agreed that the community work they performed for class could help them to
become more marketable when they graduate and feel more comfortable working with people from
a culture different from their own (mean 4.6). Students stated that they agree (mean 4.1) that their
community service promoted a better relationship with their instructor. Table 1 indicates that
most of the students disagreed (mean 2.1) with the statement that being a parent-tutor was intimi-
dating and with the statement that they would have learned more from this course if more time
was spent in the classroom instead of doing community work (mean 1.6). Community service was
the reason that students decided to take this class and participate in this study.
College students as Tutors

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>The community participation aspect of this course helped me to see how the subject matter I learned can be used in everyday life.</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>The community work I did through this course helped me to better understand the lectures and readings in this course.</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>I feel I would have learned more from this course if more time was spent in the classroom instead of doing community work.</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>I was responsible for the quantity and the quality of knowledge that I obtained from this course.</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.</td>
<td>I feel that the community work I did through this course benefited the community.</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>The community work involved in this course helped me to become more aware of the needs of the Latino/migrant population.</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g.</td>
<td>After this class, I feel more responsible for serving my community.</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h.</td>
<td>Doing work in the community helped me to define my personal strengths and weaknesses.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i.</td>
<td>Performing work in the community helped me clarify which major I will pursue.</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j.</td>
<td>The work I accomplished in this course makes me more marketable in my chosen profession when I graduate.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k.</td>
<td>I developed a good relationship with the instructor of this course because of the community work I performed.</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l.</td>
<td>I was comfortable working with cultures other than my own.</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m.</td>
<td>The work I performed in this course helped me learn how to plan and complete a project.</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.</td>
<td>The work I performed in the community enhanced my ability to communicate my ideas in a real world context.</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o.</td>
<td>I can make a difference in my community.</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p.</td>
<td>Being a parent-tutor was intimidating.</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.</td>
<td>Teaching a Latino/migrant family benefited me academically.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r.</td>
<td>Teaching a Latino/migrant family benefited me socially.</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.

College students met on a weekly basis with the families at the families’ homes. Therefore, they had the opportunity to experience the Latino culture first hand. Students reported that the experience of working with Latino migrant families opened their eyes to the families’ situation in the area (Adams County) and made them realize that Latinos are an enormous part of the American population. Students indicated that they are now more informed and aware of both the negative and positive issues of the Hispanic community in America. One student declared, “Spending time with an actual family really breaks the stereotypes that many people spread about migrant families.” Another student added, “The interaction with the Hispanic community of Gettysburg has given me such a more in-depth and realistic grasp on a large part of our society that is so unequally cared for and acknowledged.”

Spanish 305 students felt that Gettysburg college students can be very isolated and unaware of what is going on in the community. This experience allowed them to become more comfortable in the Latino community; students enjoyed listening to parents talk about their experiences in Mexico and hearing their points of view on life. One student stated that working with her family and going abroad this past summer opened her eyes to the rich culture and warm personality of Latinos. Another student declared, “Being a parent tutor helped me to break down many
preconceptions about Hispanic culture. I witnessed a way of life that I had never seen before and realize how much I could really help these people, while at the same time they could help me.”

Through the class readings and personal experiences, students were able to better understand the problems migrant farm workers and Latinos in the United States face on a daily basis. One student wrote in one of her journal entries:

I must admit that I was naive about the migrant and immigrant way of life before this experience, I knew that it existed but I, like John Rocker [former Major League Baseball player who is known for his racist remarks] while not nearly as discriminatory, did hold some stereotypes about this group of people. Through this experience I feel that I have learned so much about another culture, and in turn, a lot about my own culture. I never realized how much immigrants contribute to our economy and how much they are really a deserving and kind group of people.

Students attested that families touched their lives with their perseverance and determination to make a better living in the United States. Students indicated that working with families contradicted mindsets that indicate that many migrant families depend on the manual, mindless labor that they can easily do in order to earn money. Families work very hard to earn a living in the United States.

College students stated that one of the most rewarding learning experiences they found during the semester was to learn about the culture of the family they were working with and to make a connection with them. All of the students developed (in different degrees) personal relationships with the families. One college student stated: “It was [as] if they [the family] became part of our families. We attended school functions, drove them to places and were very happy when they [the children] received a good grade. When watching all that the kids have accomplished this past semester, my partner and I feel like the children’s proud parents.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

By being parent tutors, students gained many academic, social and cultural benefits. They practiced their Spanish in different contexts, improved their ability to communicate in Spanish and gained confidence in speaking Spanish. Students experienced situations that were related to other classes, learned first-hand how to teach others and gained first-hand knowledge about a culture different than their own.

Spanish 305 students analyzed what they read in class about the Latino and/or migrant populations in the United States and made connections to the reality of the Latino and/or migrant families in the local area. They improved their communication and social skills by successfully interacting with people from a culture different from their own, with classroom teachers and with the many community members that they contacted when families needed interpretation or support. By tutoring families in their homes, college students learned first-hand about the Latino culture and the realities of Latino migrant families living in a small, rural, Anglo community.

Most of the college students agreed that their participation in the class allowed them to become more aware of the needs and living conditions of the Latino and/or migrant population in Adams County, PA. Some students indicated that several stereotypes and preconceptions they had before their participation in Spanish 305 were broken due to the close interaction with families.

Some families also indicated that, by interacting with college students, many stereotypes they had about Americans were also broken. Serving others made a difference in students’ lives. Some students indicated that their participation in service learning affected their career choice and furthered their desire to continue participating in service opportunities. Some students indicated that they had decided to pursue a teaching career.

For most students this experience was an “eye-opener” that made a tremendous impact on
their lives and how they view the Latino families and culture. Results from this study agree with results from a ten-case study conducted by Driscoll et al. (1998) on the need to research the positive impact that service learning has on college students. By participating in the Spanish 305 class and, thereby, in the study, students were involved in a service-learning project where they gained a new awareness of themselves, their community, and of different social issues related to a different culture in the United States.

Recommendations

1. With the continued emphasis on serve and learn at institutions of higher education, college students can be trained to deliver a computer program that will meet the needs of local families and help them to take advantage of donated computers while at the same time the students will learn about their local community.
2. Basic computer training can be provided by college students under different serve and learn programs and under the direction of a qualified person who understands the needs and characteristics of the target population.
3. Clear objectives, opportunities to evaluate and reflect the service-learning process need to be set up before students visit the families.
4. Constant guidance and supervision should be provided to both college students and Latino/migrant families.
5. The majority of the low income Latino and migrant populations work very long hours, so it is recommended that local colleges include a flexible in-home program for these families.

There is no doubt that service learning is extremely time consuming, but the results and rewards that college students and community members receive make it an exceptional teaching-learning experience.

WORKS CITED

