English Language Learning in a Community Setting: Creating Pathways for Civic Engagement

Melissa Lavitt[1], Diane Boothe[2],*

[1]Academic Affairs, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, Indianapolis, USA
[2]Literacy, Language and Culture, Boise State University, Boise, USA
*Corresponding author: dianeboothe@boiestate.edu

Abstract Actively engaging community members and incorporating a problem-based learning (PBL) model in a community setting strengthens English language acquisition. This transformational learning strategy is based on three elements; achieving success in English language learning (ELL) through innovative pedagogy, creating hands-on PBL real world activities to empower students, and supporting learning by building community partnerships and fostering collaboration. Community members actively engaged in robust ELL contribute economic, societal and cultural benefits and create new avenues to inspire creativity and enthusiasm for learning. By utilizing PBL methods that empower critical thinking and incorporate real world experiences and pathways for civic engagement, ELL becomes a collaborative effort rewarded by communication with community leaders who will challenge students and strengthen learning. Implementation of this innovative PBL multi-dimensional model engages and motivates all learners, including those from underserved populations, and provides the opportunity to build relationships and connect with community members in ways that they never thought possible. Integrated technologies can also be utilized to improve ELL instruction and build workplace skills across the spectrum of community responsibilities. Examples of ways to leverage a variety of community resources and professionals to transform ELL are provided. This approach can also be expanded to myriad contexts and disciplines incorporating content across the curriculum. The pedagogical potential including meaningful research opportunities and analytics, as well as strategies for ELL educators to frame best practices focused on the diverse learning needs of the students is discussed.

Keywords: *english language learning, civic engagement, problem-based learning, community collaboration*

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1. Introduction

Much has been written about English language acquisition and the various pedagogies to support its attainment. For example, when focused on English language acquisition, problem-based learning (PBL) has been found to successfully engage learners in relevant settings that reinforce and sustain successful outcomes. [1] Studies on PBL evidence-based accomplishments focus on the combination of skills achieved for living in a knowledge-based society including personal and social responsibility, teamwork and promotion of 21st century leadership. [2] In addition to well-positioned sites for PBL, institutions of higher education have invested considerable resources and attention to the multiple communities in which they are located. In fact, whether central to an innovative pedagogy, or to the mission of an urban-serving institution, community-based teaching, learning and service represent an under-explored theme in working with key communities. These two separate trends - PBL/ELL & CE - converge when one examines how best to serve non-native newcomers to our communities. This research describes the value of applying both of these constructs for community-based English language learning, and provides guidance in selecting sites for leveraging such efforts.

The myth of the boundaried, inward-focused ivory tower has never been more irrelevant to colleges and universities, particularly those located in urban settings. From the perspective of the modern university, the success of refugees and immigrants in our communities is simultaneously framed as a question of finding an appropriate language-instruction strategy as well as focusing on learners' broader engagement and integration within a community. From this perspective success implies that our students learn and use English in order to become more fully connected to their new homes and neighborhoods. We know that ELL is required for engaged citizenship and community involvement. Significant attention and research, however, have been devoted to the former rather than to the latter. It is not enough to provide English language instruction; universities are also expected to facilitate and support active citizenship and engagement. Given the growing trend of community-based learning and partnership, this work explores how we are partnering within our

communities, and why this matters for the success of learners.

Numerous complexities exist within communication composed of multicultural environments and multilingual citizens, which increasingly describes most urban settings in the United States. It is not enough for learners to demonstrate English language proficiency. Language acquisition is enhanced when context and culture are taught alongside vocabulary and grammar. Based on this observation, this work provides a conceptual overview of how the goals of PBL/ELL are enhanced when considered as part of the broader discourse on CE. We see value in revisiting our understanding of community-based PBL/ELL, particularly in light of what we perceive to be a lack of attention to details pertaining to community partners. To these ends, this research presents a reconceptualization of PBL/ELL in recognition of the unique needs of ELL as newcomers to the community, as well as the role of institutions of higher education - particularly public institutions - in serving as resource to the diverse communities in which we are located.

The authors are two long-serving academic administrators from professional disciplines: education and social work. We bring a history of serving as champions of civic engagement and inclusive campus environment to our work. As academic leaders, we know first-hand the difficulty, as well as the value, of crafting meaningful partnerships. One must choose carefully as the impact on learners and partners can be long-term in terms of challenges, relationships, and student learning. One author, Boothe, has deep experience teaching, researching and practicing ELL and has served as keynote and plenary speaker at global conferences on the topic of PBL and ELL. The other author, Lavitt, has academic and practical experience background in social work. Both authors have observed the powerful impact of community-based learning, and sought to better understand and analyze this phenomenon.

Any discussion of community-based learning would be incomplete without acknowledging the setting for this research. In Idaho, there is a significant, and growing, population of Latino or Hispanic native Spanish speakers. It should be noted, however, that over one hundred native languages other than English are represented locally and require opportunities for English language learners from various backgrounds to interact and collaborate. In Boise, Idaho, refugees displaced from numerous nations are making a significant impact on the community. Because they will not be returning to their native country, and there is no chance for repatriation, the need for English language acquisition is even more acute. What may be as critical as English language acquisition is the development of citizenship skills, habits, knowledge and experiences. Not only will a civic perspective facilitate learning, it may also enhance the development of supportive networks in an adopted home. Furthermore, as will be discussed, PBL ELL in a community setting yields important benefits to all partners, including the university and various local organizations.

2. Purpose

This work attempts to broaden the discussion and understanding of PBL to include concepts drawn from the community engagement literature, such as active citizenship, integrative learning, and civic engagement. This work provides an additional dimension, community-based learning and civic engagement, to our understanding of how English language learners (ELLs) can successfully improve their linguistic and civic skills, while universities and community partners similarly benefit from the connections formed with Ells.

In addition to examining ELL and PBL in a community setting, this research explores one of the most critical pragmatic issues associated with this pedagogy: selection of a community site. Specifically, we will identify criteria of a successful community-based PBL site. Without sufficient attention or guidance, the potential of this transformative learning approach may be inadvertently mitigated. With an appropriate partner identified, the selection criteria will help educators mine the experience for maximum benefit to the student, the community, and the university.

Therefore, our work represents a conceptual marriage of the constructs ELL through PBL considered from a broader framework of community engagement. We see value in moving beyond a focus on learning outcomes, as these are already well supported [3], and seek to understand the community and site-specific context for this successful pedagogical strategy.

What follows is a discussion of this pedagogical strategy based on the PBL model and focused on student-centered language learning in a community setting. Criteria for successful learning sites will be described and the potential benefits for partners will be presented. In addition, the limitations of this study will be described along with recommendations for future research. We provide this discussion as an illustration of important lessons learned in enhancing the role of public universities in serving ELL communities.

The following questions stimulated this discussion:

1. Why are some PBL sites successful, and others not? How is success defined in this context?

2. From a conceptual perspective, what is the connection between PBL/ELL and civic engagement?

3. Broadly considered, what are the benefits of this approach, and what further research will help elucidate the value added of this perspective?

3. PBL, ELL & Community Engagement: A Conceptual Merger of Disparate Constructs

PBL has evolved from the medical field to numerous disciplines [4]. As a pedagogy for linguistically diverse students, it encourages interaction with and engagement in real world problem solving. Globally, it is difficult to imagine a better way to impact language learning than to use a PBL pedagogy with its focus on real-world learning activities that sustain community partnerships and encourage collaboration among local citizens. The active learning that is fostered by a PBL curriculum is ultimately enhanced, and likely to be sustained, when embedded within a community context. The global quickly becomes local when refugees and immigrants learn alongside community neighbors. Learners as well as community

participants have opportunities to "flex" their civic "muscles" and related habits of civic-mindedness [5] when engaged in solving shared problems.

The terms civic and community engagement are typically used interchangeably in the research. The term "civic," however captures a more discrete set of skills that may be collectively described as relating to "active citizenship." The civic habits that may be developed and strengthened for ELLs include volunteerism, knowledge of community resources, participation in civic events, and appreciation of the diversity of within the community. When activated outside of the classroom, and closer to home, the result is learning that is relevant, action-based, and likely to foster a commitment to lifelong learning. Because civic engagement requires mutual learning - on the part of student, instructor and community partner - the approach takes into account, and respects, ELLs' histories of involvement in their countries of origin, and strives to reconnect these individuals to new collaborations in their American homes. While English language learning may be new, refugees are often experienced in helping to build a better community.

From a cognitive constructivist point of view, PBL presents learners with a problem that activates previously acquired knowledge. This knowledge is built upon as learners collaborate in small groups while developing empirical evidence to support - or refute - hypotheses, while engaging in problem solving and the process of learning [6].

4. PBL/ELL in the Community: Operationalizing the Conceptual

There are many examples of PBL projects, partnerships, and products across multiple disciplines and fields. Popular and effective initiatives have been developed at ethnic markets, community gardens, dual language schools, sports programs, community art programs, and language learning centers. Across settings, the process is generally similar. English language learners first identify a meaningful problem, such as growing a garden, running a booth at an art fair, or developing social service programs for families. Furthermore, typical phases can be identified in most projects. These include: problem selection, planning, researching, preparing outcomes or deliverables, sharing results and assessing the conclusions [7]. Responsibility for negotiating each phase rests on all parties in equal measure.

Community partners must be carefully selected in order to operationalize the conceptual promise of PBL/ELL in the community. Not every willing organization or agency will provide quality learning in a manner that serves broader goals of engagement and civic learning. For example, it is important to select a partner site that has deep roots as well as broad connections in the community. Not only will the authenticity of PBL be enhanced, but future engagement - on the part of the university, student and community partner - is more likely to continue. With on-going engagement, both ELL and civic learning are enhanced. Community-based partners are more likely to provide successful outcomes when the following criteria are met:

1. Mutual benefit: In addition to being well-established and well-connected, PBL sites should be able to articulate an organizational benefit to developing stronger connections with immigrant and refugee communities. In fact, each PBL team should identify goals and benefits for each participant. This often means looking to neighborhood recreation centers, social service agencies, or mission-specific community-based agencies that actively seek participation and broader community inclusion. For example, a refugee-serving social service agency benefits from access to a pipeline of participants; newcomers to long-term residents. This continuum of newcomers' familiarity with the community may help make the learning and the partnership more sustainable. Specifically, newcomers can witness works in progress as well as efforts that have been completed. Furthermore, local government offices that focus on serving specific neighborhoods also see value in engaging with established and newer immigrant families. The longer term residents become strong ambassadors and liaisons between the partnering agency and various local communities.

2. Sustainability: In order to truly empower participants, it is critical that relationships are formed and teams designed with sustainability in mind. It does not serve the student or the community if only the professional teacher holds the keys to the community network. Instead, participants need to be fully engaged in creating mutually beneficial relationships. In this way sustainability over time is ensured and both the ELL and the community partner see value-added. PBL projects often have a specific product of end-point. Planning should include post-project updates as well as roles for "alumni," perhaps as tutors for future classes.

3. Skill or competency based: Successful community-based PBL initiatives should provide opportunities to either develop and/or demonstrate an existing skill or competency. This is important because outcomes should be clearly identified and identifiable; areas for improvement are thus obvious and not blurred by cultural misunderstandings. For example, participants in a community garden are likely to have shared ideas about what constitutes a successful or healthy garden regardless of what crop is planted; that is, recognition of a bountiful harvest is likely to transcend cultural definitions. The process of designing and working in the garden, however, may highlight ethnic, national and social differences. For example, what and how to plant will likely reflect cultural variation, yet all participants can bring relevant experiences to the work at hand. When students arrive at a problem with some pre-existing competency, they are more likely to feel comfortable taking other linguistic risks.

4. Access to and availability of broader network: The quality of the PBL project and learning are influenced by the context of a particular setting, i.e., location, mission, resources and staffing of a particular community site. More importantly, however, is the quality of the agency's community network. Therefore, the selection and partnering process must take into account the broader community in which the student will interact. To be truly transformational, the learning must extend and endure beyond completion of the learning project. In other words, if the community partners play a key role in the civic and cultural life of a community, then it is likely that they

offer additional opportunities and partnerships for participants. Sites that are well-connected, and community supported potentially offer greater benefits to participants.

Many PBL activities (gardening, art, International food events) often have a sponsoring entity. When selecting partners, it is important to identify the type of network that is potentially accessible by participants at the PBL site. For example, possible sponsors include: faith based organizations, schools, social service agencies, and governmental offices. Each of these entities represents a powerful community-based network. However, not all programs, learning opportunities, and initiatives provide easy access to the partner's network. In order to ascertain the "connectability" of a sponsor's network, it may be important to find out about a partner's advisory boards, volunteers, and related professionals, and their involvement in the PBL activities. It is through these broader community connections that habits of inclusion and engagement are most likely to develop to the benefit of all participants. In addition, a broader level of connectivity allows participants to continue their habits of engagement beyond the initial project. According to Friedman & Podolny [8], efforts to facilitate boundary spanning on the part of the university must address both individuals and community organizations. It is not sufficient to merely place an individual student within an organization. In addition, it is important for the university to assess how such partnerships can help them and their affiliated organizations achieve mission-specific goals.

The power of PBL in a community setting rests on the extent to which students remain active participants in a community connection - beyond the class, and beyond the initial language learning goals. Newcomers must reconstruct their identity as they build a new home in a culturally unfamiliar place. The process is facilitated through interactions with a broader swath of community members who represent various facets of the student's new home. For example, in a recent project for the City of Boise, a webpage of translation resources was created in partnership with the university's school of social work, the city, and several local refugee-serving instructors and agencies. A diverse, multi-national group of "students" also served as language experts, while working with university student interns and city employees. Furthermore, this real-world project also provided access to and instruction in software that is easily found in most public libraries. The experience provided specific skills and products, as well as access to deep networks of connections. Each participant came to recognize their role and contribution to each other's civic interactions. Furthermore, these connections offer rich potential because the participants interacted from multiple perspectives and multiple identities as student/teacher/consumer/citizen. It is the latter category of actions and identity - citizen - that offers less explored, but powerful, opportunities to all parties.

5. Benefits: Combining Civic and Language Learning to Solve Community Problems

The benefits of this pedagogical approach are observable for ELLs, community members, sponsoring agencies and the community at large. Experience suggests that PBL in community settings provides students with a direct pathway inside a community, while retaining key competencies of an older identity, and embracing the opportunity to acquire new cultural competencies in a safe environment. Students have opportunities to "validate their own knowledge, and construct new knowledge" [9]. Furthermore, this pedagogy is likely to support deeper integrative learning because it is typically perceived as relevant, personal, and experiential. Students solve problems they find meaningful. The community setting provides an opportunity to identify with a role other than "newcomer" and use less linguistically based skills such as gardening, art, and religion.

More practically, PBL for ELL provides experiences and competencies that are valued by employers. For example, students' projects may, in fact, focus on micro enterprise initiatives such as selling produce from a community garden at a farmers' market. As Holland notes (2005, as cited by Weerts) [10] institutions located in "economic hubs with significant regional challenges are more likely to include engagement in their institutional mission." Located in or a near such a hub invites economic investment from sponsors, and facilitates students' job-seeking. Holland's work implies that engagement may be easier in setting where "boundary-spanners" are embedded in the communities they serve, as opposed to serving in places that are neither economic hubs nor economically challenged. ELLs working in partnership with boundary spanners from local agencies and organizations, are more likely to learn about, and be encouraged to pursue, employment opportunities through the partner's network.

There are also considerable benefits to the community partner. PBL helps an agency move from culturally 'adapted' to culturally specific practice. PBL makes it more likely for a project to be co-constructed and therefore culturally specific [11]. Furthermore, engaged and experiential learning offer a powerful relational component. Relationships between participants are often keys to effecting personal, organizational or community change. In fact, some would argue that ELL should include "opportunities to think critically about and perhaps to effect change in their lives" [12].

According to AASCU sponsored research (2002), [13] benefits for community and regional entities that engage with colleges and universities include:

• Expands resources available to tackle local issues and problems;

• Promotes local solutions to local challenges;

• Offers the potential of "neutral ground" for discussion and resolution of controversial issues; and

• Provides an opportunity to address short- and long-term priorities and concerns with a key constituency.

When ELL students and educators leverage stimulating and dynamic PBL student-centered experiences sustained by community engagement, achievement and performance is increased. This model can be replicated for the specific needs and abilities of all ages and levels of learning. We found that community members welcome the collaborative opportunity to become involved, interface with students, build relationships and make positive

contributions to ELL performance and outcomes. This positive interaction provides rich and high quality experiences for community members and students adding value to learning and setting the stage for future accomplishments and success.

6. Limitations & Future Research

As described earlier, this research presents a conceptual overview of the value of problem based learning intentionally situated in an engaged community context. Our observations are just that: acknowledgement of a powerful synergy that would benefit from empirical examination. This work is meant to serve as a catalyst - both conceptually and methodologically - for future investigation. Future research should explore how to operationalize and measure the community benefit of these learning opportunities. Through observation and anecdote, it is clear that there is mutual and reciprocal value to the participants. Assessing and describing these positive outcomes would help us understand how to design future transformative learning experiences. It should be noted that this work describes the value of such endeavors, but its generalizability is limited due to the fact that an empirically investigated implementation model is not described.

Future work would benefit from an emerging array of assessment tools that help to measure and analyze the process, products and quality of the university's engagement efforts. Although beyond the scope of this work to describe this body of work, Furco's [14] and Holland's [15] institutional assessments are illustrative. The community-engaged university has moved beyond creating one-way efforts that focus on studying local issues, or placing students [16]. Instead, the institution's higher purpose of serving and facilitating the public good is now at the heart of developing mutually beneficial partnerships. This work comes from that emerging focus.

Investigation of community engagement in PBL can be extended to other learning contexts, for example, business, international business, and universities. Our work identifies key criteria that are essential for selecting a partner for PBL projects. In general, opportunities that lead to on-going, sustainable engagement are those that are competency based, and allow connections to robust community networks. PBL supports authentic learning and improves/increases language acquisition. When this occurs in an engaged and supportive community, students can develop skills that are valued by employers. Using sustainable community-based projects, learning deepens and extends to mutually reinforcing networks [17]. Future work could validate these selection criteria for community sites.

Furthermore, it should be noted that such pedagogical choices help further the institution's local mission and presence. As Weertz & Sandmann [18] note, both individual and organizational goals and benefits need to be explored. This particular example of PBL learning illustrates the value of boundary-spanning efforts for both the students, community partners, and the institution. This work affirms the idea of university-community engagement as a complex set of activities that occur at multiple levels for those involved. Moving beyond older notions of service learning, the learning strategy described here is based on a mutually beneficial and reciprocal arrangement that yields both short and long term benefits to participants.

7. Conclusion

In a time when declines in civic literacy are bemoaned in the media and across college campuses, an array of community-based projects provides students, instructors and sponsors a sense of pride and ownership of mutually developed initiatives and shared outcomes. As described, it is critical that these connections require on-going communication, sharing of resources and decision-making in order to maintain the viability of the collaboration.

It is this attention to civic life that ultimately focuses individuals and organizations beyond oneself and one's personal growth. Developing civic perspectives and tools to all who are involved deepens our connections to local and global issues, and exemplifies the transformative power of a sound pedagogical strategy. This work is particularly critical for our newest citizens. Both universities and newcomers to our country are interested in developing pathways to fulfill goals of economic security and active citizenship. English language learning, achieved through PBL in a community setting represents an important model of engaged and transformative pedagogy to achieve these ends.

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