



NICE Service Learning: English in the Community

by Alice Wahl Lachman (University of Hawaii at Manoa)



Introduction

More than 50 years ago, Martin Luther King urged, “*Everyone can be great because everyone can serve.*” His call was for humanity to celebrate its potential by reaching out to others in need. At the University of Hawaii Manoa Outreach College, the *English for Conversational Purposes* program (ECP) at NICE (*New Intensive Courses in English*) has been realizing MLK’s challenge for almost two years through its service learning skills class. Along with accuracy and fluency classes, international students representing multiple cultures have learned about American culture from the inside out and shared their own cultures with the Oahu community. By using their English skills in an authentic way in the community, students have learned through service. They continue to make a difference and through their contribution begin to understand local and national social, economic, and environmental challenges.

Community Service Activities

This integrated skills class of students with lower and upper level English ability has five main branches: (a) individual volunteer sites (b) group volunteer events (c) classroom speakers from local non-profit organizations (d) integration through reflection and presentation, and (e) on-line research and dialogue with other service learners locally, nationally, and internationally. Students volunteer a minimum of 2 hours each week at a site related to their interests. For example, one computer teacher from Japan studying English for 6 months at NICE volunteered at a local high school technology center. Other students volunteered weekly at the Senior Day Care Center or at a Child Care Center. In addition to individual sites, students work with native speaker groups or special events. Examples include feeding the homeless in Waikiki, organizing an origami project at the Kapiolani Women’s and Children’s Hospital, helping out with the June Jones Foundation Run for HUGS, preparing food with the Salvation Army Thanksgiving for the needy, reading stories at the Boys and Girls Club, planting trees for the Hawaiian garden at a local elementary school, helping with the Honolulu *keiki* triathlon and the Honolulu marathon, assisting US student volunteers at the Ronald McDonald House, and guiding people on the Honolulu City Lights Trolley – a fundraising event for the Hawaii Foodbank.

In class, we have welcomed speakers from non-profit agencies such as the Red Cross, Ronald McDonald, Habitat for Humanity, Outdoor Circle, PACT, HUGS, Special Olympics, Alzheimer’s Association, Aloha United Way, the Domestic Violence Hotline in Japan and Hawaii Foodbank. Students improve their listening comprehension and speaking fluency by taking notes, asking questions and sharing their cultural perspectives.

Reflection, Sharing and Research

Another important component of the class is student reflection. Students share in writing and in conversation what they did that week, how they feel, what questions they have, and what cultural insights they gleaned. They also review films such as *Pursuit of Happiness* or *Pay It Forward* to reflect on their experiences. Students have also participated at service learning conferences at Kamahameha, Punahou School and the University of Hawaii. By telling others of their service, they see themselves in a bigger community of learners and volunteers. Some moments are unforgettable. At a service learning conference at Kamahameha, students got to meet Julie Chavez, daughter of Cesar Chavez who was the conference speaker.

A final component is online research and dialogue. Students are now linking up with other college students doing service learning to create a dialogue that will go beyond the class and Hawaii. We are bridging with programs on the mainland and abroad too. Students also research local and international NGOs (*Doctors Without Borders, the Peace Corps, Habitat for Humanity, Second Harvest...*) and present to the class what they learn.

NICE students have volunteered more than 1,000 hours of service this past year alone. Students have engaged with all kinds of people from Oahu, shared their cultures, and used their English in an authentic way. By giving to the local community, our students have demonstrated MLK’s concept of being “great.” In addition, they have been given an exciting opportunity for leadership, empowerment through contribution, cross-cultural insight and language development.

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