

LANGUAGE LEARNERS CAN “MAKE A DIFFERENCE”: BENEFITS OF A VOLUNTEERING OPTION FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a group of 70 students of English as an Additional Language (EAL) studying New Zealand culture and language at a tertiary institute in Auckland who became volunteers during community placement. Of the original cohorts, 16 of the students, from a wide range of backgrounds, became regular volunteers as a result of a community placement they were required to do for a unit in their BA (EAL) degree. The concept of community placement is valuable in the EAL sector, where work placements are commonly used as a way of acculturating EAL students, whether they are international students, migrants or refugees, into the linguistic, cultural and practical aspects of workplace experience. Community placements allow such learners to explore their linguistic, cultural and practical learning in supportive, community-based contexts such as rest homes, advice bureaux or charity shops. Backed by an investigation of the concept of “community”, this study identifies the students’ experiences of cultural, linguistic and practical learning in their communities. This project gave learners access to “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger 1992; Wenger 1998) that aligned with the kinds of communities they imagined as valuable to their future identities; in other words, “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983). The data in this project consists in the reflected journals of participants in community placements that are analysed thematically. They reveal the cultural, linguistic and ontological value of community work for invested learners. As an educational study, it shows how community placements can prepare learners both for their future work as volunteers and for their imagined communities, where they see themselves as contributing to their “host” culture but able, as one participant writes, “to make a difference”.

Keywords: learning communities, communities of practice, investment

Community and belonging

Peter Block's *Community: The structure of belonging* (2008: 1) opens with an opportunity for fragmented communities of disengaged individuals everywhere: "The essential challenge is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole". The need to belong, he maintains, comes from the isolation that has come to characterise our silo-separated lives, institutions and communities due to the dominance of "our individualistic narrative" (2). The need to belong arguably characterises anyone entering higher education, but may be particularly marked among students of English as an Additional Language (variously migrants, refugees and international students). This paper reports on a project in which learners experienced connectedness within learning communities, and hence experienced some of the transformation Block describes. The study aims to identify the cultural, linguistic, and transformative capital of community placement (volunteering in a community context for a specified period, detailed below) for advanced level students studying English as an Additional Language (EAL) within a Bachelor of Arts program in a tertiary institute in Auckland, New Zealand. I begin with an investigation into what "community" is in the context of this study.

Broadly, Foster (1996: 25) argued, "community" comprises "a set of voluntary, social, and reciprocal relations that are bound together by an immutable 'we-feeling'". To examine their features, communities' elements are *mutual interdependence, sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals* and *overlapping life histories* (Rovai 2002a: 4). Communities can be real or imagined, real or virtual. They can be communities of practice (CoPs), which can in turn be communities of interest, purpose and passion (Tu & Corry 2002: 209). Communities are constructed by interaction and are sites of individual and collective identity (Cohen 1985). "Community" involves invested social capital (Bourdieu 1986, 1991; Putnam 2000). This refers to connections among individuals and social networks and "the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam 2000: 19).

Gaining a "sense of community" begins with feelings of membership, a sense of wanting to belong. As Dudley (2007) has shown in her study of volunteer EAL immigrants in Canada, creating links to communities contributed to students' language development and their social integration into the target culture. In this New Zealand project, "sense of community" involves the Wengerian concepts of support, common goals, shared discourse and desire for membership and relatedness (Rovai 2002b: 321). This paper argues that successfully gaining such a sense can be viewed within three prisms: that of "investment"; the notion of "community of practice", and the concept of "imagined community".

First, the project required motivated "investments" on the part of the learner (Bourdieu 1986, 1991; Norton-Pierce 1995, Norton 2000, 2001, 2006, 2009; Pittaway 2004; Pavlenko & Norton 2005), investments that need in part to be sold to the student by the enrolling institute and the instructors. A learner's desire for affiliation to a chosen community enhances their investment in performing, learning, becoming a member, and developing confidence to engage in future imagined communities (Kanno & Norton 2003; Pavlenko & Norton 2005). Investment in a discourse practiced in a learning community can lead to advances in self-knowledge and to individual and collective cultural capital (Norton 2000). Pittaway emphasised that when learners perceive a return on their investment, there is a concomitant feeling of empowerment (2004: 204). Murphey, Chen and Chen (2005) used EAL learners' language learning histories as charters to project their investments in their future imagined communities. There is, Norton (2000, 2001, 2006, 2009) suggests, an immediate connection between learner investment, desire to belong and to become, and the construction of identities as learners and members of communities and society. The study shows that learners who invest in sense of community, motivating themselves to seek cultural and social capital within community contexts, report positive even transformative educational experiences.

Second, the study can be conceptualised in terms of the social constructivist notion of “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998; Brown & Duguid 2000), where potentially expert learning can occur through initially peripheral participation in such a community. Learning communities share the properties of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Researchers of learning communities have applied this model to real world contexts (Morita 2004; Andrew & Kearney 2007). In such communities, new members move from being spectators or “apprentices” with “legitimate peripheral participation” (LPP) to being potentially in possession of a deeper, engaged, invested interest involving “the whole person acting in the world” (Wenger 1998: 98). Like the new members of CoPs, learners in community placements are participants in the evolving practices of social communities (Rovai, 2002a). Persistent investment in participation can motivate learners to reach their learning goals more effectively through the forming of strategic alliances with and within appropriate communities.

Thirdly, the concept of “imagined community” (Anderson 1983; Norton 2001; Kanno & Norton 2003; Murphey, Chen & Chen 2005) can be applied. EAL learners imagine communities they wish to belong to, but as yet do not. A culture’s sense of community is envisaged as an imagined space and individuals idealise community and create a sense of self through these imaginings (Anderson 1983). Kanno and Norton (2003) believe the analogy of nationhood and community helps would-be belongers feel a sense of community with people not yet met (2003: 241). In 2009 Norton, summarizing literature on imagined communities in language education, wrote:

Learners have different investments in particular members of the target language community, and the people in whom learners have the greatest investment may be the very people who represent or provide access to the imagined community of a given learner.

“Imagined community” describes learners’ investment in learning as it is likely to impact on future goals, ambitions, dream communities and desires for belonging and recognition. These imagined communities, Murphey, Chen and Chen (2005: 85) suggest “as learners want to belong to a community and construct their identities as members of the group, they invest energy and time into learning how to be like those members”.

In my study, the learners have in their minds idealised visions of themselves as members of future academic, national or professional communities. The learners voice desires to become closer members of a target community or citizens of their new country; to achieve a good job (either in New Zealand or their home community), participate in higher education or go to a better university. Many imagine themselves speaking better English within more native-speaker-oriented contexts. The concept of imagined communities provides a framework to understand that learners’ investment in a present community can impact both on future membership in a desired community and on the individual and personal education they need to undertake in order to warrant future membership. This framework allows, then, for desire to *belong* to be connected to desire to *become*.

All three of these concepts, “investment”, “CoP” and “imagined community” fit with frameworks focussing on linguistic and cultural learning through the kinds of participation and socialisation that characterise volunteering. The situating of learning in the social world where identities are figured derives from the work of Lave and Wenger (1991, 1998). Norton’s poststructuralist notions of investment by learning in community and its connection with evolving learner identity (Bourdieu 1986, 1991; Norton 2000) sit alongside constructivist models of identity negotiation. The poststructuralist analysis of second language acquisition as “language socialisation” (Pavlenko 2002; Duff 2007) provides a further framework for understanding

connections between participation in community and identity. Within environments of real world learning in Humanities, learning in community is a participative and learning is situated. Packer and Goicochea (2000) summarise: “the sociocultural conception of identity addresses the fluid character of human beings and the way identity is closely linked to participation and learning in the community” (2000: 229).

Background to the study

Community learning, learning community and community placement

The terms “community learning” and “learning communities” share some overlap. In *community learning*, educational value is brought to both the members and the community through community engagement, and learning is both horizontal and vertical. Participating together, sharing the same outcomes and learning horizontally characterise *learning communities* (Tu & Corry 2002: 210). Interactions are, Brown and Duguid (2000: 251) maintain, demand-driven, a social act and an act of identity formation.

Students undertaking a community placement are participating in both community learning (because there is mutual benefit between participant and community) and a learning community because the communities in which students are placed share the defining features of CoPs. Community learning can involve participants of any background, but in my study, I examine the cultural and linguistic learning acquired by EAL learners participating in community placement as a method of real-world experiential learning beyond the classroom.

What, then, is a community placement? Andrew and Kearney (2007: 33) define it as “any situated, experiential, participative activity that has the potential to provide a bridge from the classroom to the real world”. In particular:

A community placement is a course-related, pre-arranged learning opportunity where participants spend a specified period in an approved community context to achieve defined sociocultural and/ or sociolinguistic outcomes. It represents a chance for learners to observe and participate in activities that happen normally as part of the regular operation of a group interacting, communicating and socialising at a particular site, in pursuit of a common goal, using discourse typical of their community. (32)

Impacts of community placement

Globalisation has impacted strongly on both export education, including study abroad programs, and education for migrants in such countries as New Zealand, Australia and Canada. While courses are carefully structured to scaffold language learning, English language examination training, particularly in IELTS, and, more latterly workplace readiness, curricula explicitly focussed around cultural learning have been lacking or absent. This does not satisfy the needs of the three main consumers of degree-level learners enrolled in EAL courses. First, migrant learners need to learn about the social systems, institutions and social practices of their new country, and about how its people think and how they define themselves. Second, international students need to experience their host culture more deeply and interact with its people more closely so that they can situate themselves as more useful global citizens in their future communities, whether they are back in their home countries or whether they, too, elect to migrate. Thirdly, study abroad students commonly report a desire for cultural immersion, often involving a desire to learn about cultures and people from travel as well as classroom participation. Each of these three key groups has a desire for cultural experience. As Peterson and Coltrane (2003: 2) wrote, cultural instruction should “allow students to observe and explore cultural interactions from their own perspectives to enable them to find their own voices in the second language speech community”.

Community placement offers a pedagogical, curricular and/or assessment opportunity for reshaping such learners' experiences of culture and language. It is an integral part of two subjects within a BA (EAL) at Unitec New Zealand, 'Culture and New Zealand Society'. These units present portrayals of New Zealandness in the classroom by elucidating the country's bicultural heritage, migration history, film, media and arts, people who are achievers, and so on. More importantly, they provide contexts where learners are encouraged to explore beyond the classroom and experience culture, interacting in their target language in the process. Engagement with a local community brings about cultural learning so an assessed community placement is an innovative way to shape experience (Andrew & Kearney 2006, 2007).

Community placements are assessed through learners' presentation of their learning in oral and written forms. In keeping reflective journals of their situated learning and community experience, participants become ethnographers, recording what they see, hear, think and experience, and reflecting on the community, wider society and its people and themselves. They chose, with lecturer support, volunteer help groups (such as Citizen's Advice Bureaux, New Zealand Federation for the Blind); volunteer programmes run by cultural sites (museums, aquaria, environmental groups); charity and aid organisations such as the Red Cross, clubs (soccer and racing clubs), church groups (Christian communities), lobby groups (e.g. initiatives organised by the police, refugee support groups or environmental action groups) and workplaces that take volunteers (rest-homes; pre-schools, primary and high schools and language schools).

The pedagogic aims of participating in and writing reflectively about community placement are cultural competence (Byram 1997), cultural autonomy (Dlaska 2000; Sercu 2002) and cultural literacy. This involves gaining group membership and co-constructing their social practices. Participants' diaries represent an ethnographic, phenomenological record of their investments in their target culture, and of their negotiation of evolving identities (Norton 2000: 152).

Methodology

Research design

This project qualitatively analyses emergent themes in learners' reflective logs written during and shortly after a ten or more hour community placement required for the year 2 course, *Culture and New Zealand Society*, in a BA (EAL).

During their ten hours of community placement, participants were instructed to write four diary entries of 200 words each and to comment on their observations of any striking aspects of Kiwi culture. Participants were told to write freely and openly, rather than to create an error-free discourse. Most learners made pen-and-paper notes (a few, with permission, made recordings) that they wrote up as e-texts for submission as soon after the placement as possible. Because diaries record learners' investments and chart changing identities, they provide useful qualitative data for discourse analysts and ethnographers (Norton 2000: 152). In diaries, participants freely provide individual descriptions of events and behaviours. Unrestrained by discursive, generic or grammatical expectations, participants produce content-rich descriptions.

Participants

The current corpus consists of the reflective logs of 70 students from six intakes over three years. All students are second year BA (EAL) learners with academic International English Language Testing System (IELTS) bands of 6.0 or above. All students gave their permission for their words to be cited. All names cited are pseudonyms.

The subjects included refugees (3) migrants (39), international students (19) and study abroad students (9). The average length of time in New Zealand was three years, although one student had been in New Zealand

for 31 years. All of the international students had studied in English language programmes in New Zealand prior to their enrolment in the BA, so they had all been in New Zealand for at least 18 months. The study abroad students were in their first and only semester in New Zealand.

In terms of ethnic origin the participants comprise: Chinese (37), “Taiwanese” (4), “Hong Kongese” (3), Swedish (6), Korean (5), German (4), Japanese (2), and one each of Romanian, Iranian, Ethiopian, Somalian, Thai, Malaysian, Indian, French Polynesian and Samoan. There were 42 females and 28 males. The age range was from 19 to 55, with a mean of 25.

Instruments

Learner diaries were the main research instruments. Additional data was obtained from electronic text summaries learners wrote of their community-based learning. The data was collected in hard copy from students at the conclusion of the programme and stored in a locked cabinet.

Data coding and analysis

A grounded methodological approach (Strauss & Corbin 1990; Glaser 1998) was used during this research. The two researchers used open coding to locate themes that emerged from the data. Then they listed participant quotations under key categories. The researchers used methods from discourse and metaphor analysis to locate lexical and thematic similarities in the data. The two researchers independently coded items for additional reliability, later coming together to negotiate the semantics of categories. The themes were listed in order of frequency from those mentioned by the majority of participants down to those described by only several. The data reported here emerges from six semesters of research. Data from each semester confirms that collected from previous semesters. Hence, this data comprises a sufficient and reliable sample.

Findings

Cultural and social capital of learning communities

Investment and engagement contribute to learning, and there is much data in the corpus quantifying return on investment. There are, for instance, 15 instances where learners describe *how far* they have come or *how much* they have learned using the formula ‘how’ + adv. or adj.). Similarly, students use the comparative *more* (*more confident, more aware*) or other comparatives (*closer, deeper*). There are an equal number of commercial metaphors (learning described as *treasure, riches* or *valuable life experience*). These are all discursive and metaphoric indicators of return on investment. The majority of contexts are similar to that of Beth, who worked in a twilight home:

I strongly believe that I have not only enriched my knowledge of NZ culture and experiences, but also be aware of the cultural activities, which cover visual arts, festivals, some of which are celebrations of national cultures ... Being a volunteer gives me a chance to contribute to NZ society ... I have learned some typical Kiwi lifestyle, some Kiwi slang and pronunciation. More importantly, it's a wonderful opportunity of broadening my perspective of NZ culture and society.

The following section describes key themes of types of cultural and social capital that learners identify. These findings relate to participation in both community learning and communities of practice.

Opportunities for speaking

The most significant cultural capital of community placement lies in its potential to provide opportunities for overhearing and participating in spoken interactions. Laura, for instance, wrote: “speaking with different people about new topics is helpful to my learning, in contrast to learning in the classroom”. She articulates a tension between the “real” world and the classroom that resonates throughout the data. Learners also report on their application of classroom spoken communication strategies. Rosa, in a migrant centre, learned “to be humble and open-minded. That is the best way to keep a conversation very interesting and last for a long time.” John, in a hostel, demonstrates socio-cognitive awareness:

During my community placement I found myself in situations where I couldn't find the words and expressions I was looking for, but I managed to explain what I meant anyway. To talk around words you don't have in your vocabulary is a very effective method.

Learners consistently remark that they heard real locals speaking real *Newzild*, New Zealand English. Tomas, one of 30 students to comment on features of Kiwi speaking, remarks: “Kiwi English is sometimes hard to understand or it is just funny to listen [to]. The words they use are often very informal (like *bugger*, *crap*, *dude*, etc.) and the pronunciation rises at the end of a sentence”. The learners learn about Kiwis’ laidback style and high rising terminal in the classroom, but noticing such features adds value to cultural learning as learners practice meaning-making in everyday life.

Applying classroom learning

Community placements give students a real context to see concepts and objects introduced in the classroom. These concepts, seen again in the COP, become part of a learner’s shared repertoire. Les, a volunteer at a community centre, remembers a core facet of Kiwi adaptability: “The Kiwi’s *can-do attitude* which we discussed in class has been well represented in this community centre.” Other students refer to problem-solvers reflecting the “number 8 fencing wire thingie” described in class and “the *she’ll be right attitude*”. Karina, assisting in a charity shop, hears Kiwi idioms in practice:

I am really happy that I learned some kiwi slang in class because otherwise I would never understand. One man came in and I asked him how everything was, etc, and he started talking with a very hard kiwi accent, about that he just came back from the wopwops and that he was now looking for some gummies because it was about to rain.

For her, valuable learning occurred on re-cognising localisms observed in class: their cultural capital consists in hearing people using them communicatively and potentially being able to use them oneself.

The course also covers the features of New Zealand English. In the community, students get to hear for themselves. Sophia, participating in a shellfish-monitoring programme, listened closely enough to identify Kiwi features in her supervisor’s speaking:

By listening to John’s speech, I felt his Kiwi pronunciation is heavier than our teachers’ but more light than other Kiwis’. I only could recognise his vowel sound /e/ when he said “instead”, he said ‘instid’.

Beth, in a retirement home, is even more perceptive and makes a socio-cultural observation:

Older people are more likely to pronounce words like 'grown, thrown' with one syllable, and younger people ... with two syllables ('growen, thrown').

Such comments testify to a developing socio-cultural literacy as well as evidence of socio-cognitive process of recognising patterns introduced in the classroom.

Surprises and re-cognitions

Many learners document episodes in which they describe their advancements in socio-cultural knowledge about New Zealand, its people and language. These might be moments of “surprise” (Norton 2000: 152), moments of re-cognition of classroom input, or broader realisations of cultural learning. The most expressive metaphor of moving through a transitional space towards self-knowledge occurs in Moira’s analysis of her progression:

I have tried to take part in their social activities. However, I couldn't understand them at all. I felt that I am standing out of the door, I can see through windows, I can hear their sounds, I can copy their actions but I don't know why they do that ... now I do not worry about this. I have learnt their culture, although not completely. I talk with them much more confidently and state my opinion.

Even after her placement Kiwis remain “them”, and Moira remains a mimic not a member, peripheral in a COP. Commenting at first on Kiwi symbols during a visit to a retirement village on April 25, Dora writes:

Anzac Day, poppies, Anzac biscuits. A lot of elderly people fairly enjoyed a traditional ANZAC biscuit, and enjoyed the pleasure of reminiscence as well. Stories and laughter filled the coffee inn ... one elderly dipped her Anzac biscuit in her tea and she was shaking. I could see a tear in her eye.

Other examples include Ivor’s realisation that his knowledge of the Treaty of Waitangi enables him to converse with a Maori co-volunteer; Malli’s reflection on the memory of the war for rest home veterans; Karmen’s realisation that Kiwis are trusting people when she is allowed to handle money, and Jill’s recognition, during a Christian trip to Rangitoto that she, now, is a part of this land.

Cultural contrasts

Learners develop cultural capital in understanding local and national practices by noticing and reflecting on contrasts with their own cultures (Norton 2000, 152). When experiencing the ‘other’, learners understand it by identifying how it differs from or is similar to their own culture. Understandings of the treatment of the elderly or the education of pre-schoolchildren, for instance, evolve from a process of re-cognising the cultural model (Byram 1997). The data includes reflections on differences in attitudes to rethomes, the instructive actions of pre-school teachers and the relative value given leisure. Jean observes: “Instead of having formal teaching and learning, the kindergarten provides a variety of activities ... promoting kids’ interests in exploring”. John, in a student hostel, articulates the process:

It is inevitable that you will compare your own culture with foreign cultures. When I meet a Kiwi I will always try to find similarities and dissimilarities in his behaviour compared to my own ... my experiences of New Zealand culture are not only a result of this country's culture, but also of my previous culture ... we are all influenced and nothing will be objective.

An example of this comparison appears in Les's diary. Les is an adult migrant who participated in the activities of a local community centre.

Asians do not come [to the foodbank] very often; Maori people seem to come more often. ... But every time I saw Maori or Polynesian people come to the food bank, they were still happy. You can't see any difficulties or unhappy feelings on their face. It not only shows Kiwis' strong community support but also their optimistic spirit ... In China, if someone saw you go to ask for a food parcel, you will be looked down upon by others.

Students identify differences in values and mores. New Zealand's lack of corruption, bribery and tax fraud are mentioned. So, too, is New Zealanders' ease in spending, use of hire purchase and the charity they exhibit in food banks and missions. Participants express surprise that people are open about their poverty and are not too proud to ask for charity. "New Zealanders", writes CAB volunteer Sandra, "can get a community card that they use while seeing doctors. However, people who phoned in called it 'poor people card' in their native language". A similar lack of stigma attached to poverty appears in Peggy's description of Kiwis' willingness to buy second-hand goods, and Les's contrastive observation: "In China, if someone saw you go to ask for a food parcel, you will be looked down upon by others".

Desire to fit in

Another key theme to introduce here is the desire to succeed as a participant within their chosen community and/or to become a member. This involves both doing well, through their own actions, and being accepted by local people. Prior to her work with a Christian community, Margaret hoped she could "do well and fit in"; by her third entry, she was describing incidents where she was a participant and a member (negotiating a recipe, supervising a barbeque). Ivor, after conversing with a Maori volunteer at an aquarium and demonstrating interest in Maori culture, "realized that understanding a culture could help me to integrate into a society easily".

The process of fitting in is facilitated by the attitudes of workers in the volunteer sector. On day 2, Karmen wrote: "It feels like I am part of the staff now because the people who work there are counting on me and trust me." Such positive experiences impact on learners' perceptions of themselves as operating in future imagined communities. This is shown by Spring's remark about a Waitangi workshop: "I've learned everyone is different; everyone is entitled to their own opinion and beliefs... I believe this point will benefit my future work and study".

Finally, community placements offer learners to potential to move from peripheral, observational 'outsiderness' to a participative 'insiderness'. After volunteering in her son's soccer club, Miwa writes:

I have just been living in my own culture, not try to integrate the culture that I am living ... the positive outcome for me is that I am trying to recognise real New Zealand culture and society. It is not from an outsider's view, but it's a view from a New Zealander, me.

For her, the impacts of community placement extend beyond sociolinguistic and socio-cultural knowledge into something the researchers did not expect to find: knowledge of the changing self.

Imagined communities

Half the participants report that they have had a lack of opportunity to communicate with Kiwis during their New Zealand experience and that their goal was to speak with local people in the real world. “That’s why”, writes Sara, “I embraced my community placement with both hands”.

The community placement is an interim imagined community where learners can trial the literacies and identities they need for future imagined communities. Karen begins her journal with the words: “I believe that to be a volunteer of Asian Health Support Service is the start of my career in New Zealand”. Diana, who worked in a Red Cross shop, articulates the connection between her imagined community and her community placement:

The original motivation for me was to plan ahead with my future career. As New Zealand work experience is demanded, I thought taking a volunteering job not only gives me an opportunity to participate in society and help other community members, but also affords me a window to observe New Zealand society, gain some experience in working in customer service area, and most importantly practice my English language.

Students are surprised by their own abilities to make a difference to others and to discover things for themselves. This new confidence gives them a glimpse of a future self-identity. Zheng, who had worked in McDonalds, decided to train to work there during his holidays instead of going back to China: “It gives me a real life lesson in society. I will continue working in this multicultural workplace during my summer holiday, and I will discover more”. Cynthia reflects on her rest home experience: “it was a great opportunity to improve my listening and speaking skills, and I wish that I could do something similar to this in my future”. Dany, who after her placement wants to be an interpreter writes: “Now I have visited the police station, seen how they treat suspects, attended their conferences and meetings, I would be happy to help to build a bridge between police and the Chinese community.” For others, the experience of learning in community leads to a promise to the self. “I will be looking forward to being a volunteer sometime in the future”, wrote Faith, a rest home volunteer.

Ivor, stationed at an aquarium, writes on day one of a Maori volunteer and hopes to have a chance to meet him. This desire has all the qualities of an imagined community. His day two entry describes the meeting:

He was funny. He said *chaofan* (fried rice) to me because he knows I am a Chinese. I was surprised. Then we started a conversation. I really wanted to have a good start, so I showed him my knowledge of Maori with asking his *iwi*’s name. He told me his *iwi*’s name is ‘*Tomokagna*’ (not sure about the spelling, I did not write it down immediately). Then we talked about the Maori *tikanga*. I could feel his happiness about my knowledge of Maori because it is not common that an international student especially a Chinese student knows so much about Maori. I realized that understanding a culture could help me to integrate into a society easily.

Ivor’s learning goes beyond linguistic and cultural literacy into both a humane learning and the realisation that such transactions can create a bridge between people and lead to acceptance and even what is obviously his desire, “integration”.

Seven students admit to having never imagined being a part of a community in New Zealand, but all are grateful for the cultural and social capital gained. Grace writes: “if the class didn’t ask me to do the community placement, I wouldn’t have done it”. She overcomes her fear, and by the time she finishes her

diary she writes: “It was a good chance to get a bridge into real life in New Zealand. I’m going to continue to do the volunteer work all I can”, adding that her involvement in the volunteer sector gives her a pride in New Zealand that she had not had before. Perhaps the most interesting one on this theme is Jean, who decided to accept the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ fourth invitation to join a Bible study because she needed to find a placement for her course. In her first diary entries she writes that “it was a good chance to practice reading and speaking”; by the end of the diary, struck by the community’s encouragement and interest in her, her family and her culture, she has become a keen member of the group, spending 5 hours per week in a Bible study group. Her motivation remains academic and not religious: “It sounds like I am taking an extra paper for my BA course”. This is a big step for her as, she relates, Jehovah’s witnesses are banned in China. In her case, being part of a learning community is more important than the content and mission of that community.

For the 16 students who became permanent volunteers, realising a type of imagined community leads to a desire to be more deeply involved. In these journals, there is a strong sense of a changed outlook and a changed person with a new curiosity and power to discover for themselves. “I feel like I can make a difference”, writes Sara, one of 5 students who became fully trained Citizens’ Advice Bureau helpers. “It was only a small task, but I could feel her smile”, writes rest home worker, Beth, who lived on-site for a year with two other former ‘Culture and New Zealand Society’ students-turned-volunteers. Helping others also gives her what she calls a “window into New Zealand culture”. Karmen, in a Maori preschool wrote in her third entry: “It feels like I am part of the staff now because the people who work here are counting on me and trust me”. These students are almost all adult migrants (7 of 16) or refugees (3, Somalia, Ethiopia) with strong investment in a Kiwi future, or potential Bilingual tutors or language teachers (5 others). Somali refugee and CAB volunteer, Mora wrote: “I want to return something to this country which gave my family a home”.

Discussion

Being able to harness the learning potential of learning communities and/ or community learning presents a rich range of teaching and learning opportunities for instructors and students in the Humanities. Since the learning is situated and involves participation in communities of practice, its benefits may not be predictable, but the very unpredictability of situated learning means that there will be rewards in the students’ surprises for those who invest. These rewards may be educational or ontological, such as those outlined in the findings. Students may gain insights into how they can perform in a real-world context and how they can learn from the interactions of core community members. They may also gain heightened understandings of their own ability as community and society members, current and future citizens and nationals, and potentially agential individuals with the ability to make a difference to others.

There is much potential learning available in community contexts, both learning communities and community learning. Whether students unlock this potential depends on investing in participating in the mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire of the learning community. In the community placement, the potential apprentices need investment in the regularity and interactivity of the community’s engagement, trust and interest in its members’ shared and individual purposes, and desire to access and acquire the communicative and cultural media and capital that comprise the community’s shared repertoire.

The concept of shared repertoire is particularly important when considering that it contains capital that can help learners access a future or imagined community. In the context of community placement, the shared repertoire comprises the linguistic, idiomatic, socio-pragmatic, procedural and socio-cultural resources held by members of the community of practice and accessible to the second-language learners.

While community learning provides a physical context for language and cultural socialisation, learning communities provide environments where learners can establish and develop identities that can help them to

reach course outcomes, individual learning goals, and imagined future communities. In the process, there is the potential for their energies to help others, and lead to a sense of having a role as a useful community learner as well as a learner for self-development and advancement. Engaging in communities of practice in both real and imagined contexts has the capacity for individuals to attain images of themselves not only as a more confident and competent achiever of outcomes, but as a person whose contribution can make a difference. Norton (2001: 163) has described these as “new images of possibility and new ways of understanding one’s relation to the world”.

Conclusions

This study has presented a context in which targeted instruction that harnesses “community” can bring students closer to achieving those course outcomes that accord with their own their goals. At the same time getting the full potential out of ‘community’ can afford learners incidental but invaluable windows into their own creative and humanitarian potential. These windows, offered by the students’ reflective journals allow us to view the cultural and social capital students consider themselves to have gained.

This paper has used the concept of imagined communities to suggest that investment in the learning community is crucial if participants are to gain maximal cultural and social capital that can help them to achieve future goals beyond the lifespan of the present learning community. Instructor interventions such as suggestions of places for future work can be invaluable here. I have also suggested that understanding learning situated in learning communities helps us to conceptualise learner’s need to ‘be’ in the present as well as their ability to ‘become’ in the future. Having the chance to explore a range of identity options can be both instructive and motivating for learners. Jill, a Thai migrant, writes of her chance to go this: “I have been to Rangitoto Island twice and I am feeling that I am more appreciative of where I am and who I am”.

Participating in communities impacts on learners’ negotiation of multiple identities. In providing learners with the chance to explore such options, instructors accord with constructivist, socio-cultural and poststructuralist notions of identity. Identities, in flux, a site of struggle, but also capable of amazing resilience, are formed and negotiated in situated social environments such as learning communities. Identities are subject to messages contained in the discourses of the powerful, who may be core members of the desired imagined community. Learning that involves a new awareness of oneself and one’s place in the world is valuable both as cultural and social capital.

Instructors of learners working in learning communities and involved in community learning are in a powerful position to bring learners to an understanding not only of their own present and potential learning, but also of the impacts they are humanly capable of having on others. Instructors can harness community to find the “spaces for the enhancement of human possibility” that Norton’s migrant women located in their journals (Norton 2000) and that many of the students whose words appear in this paper found as they reflected on their community placements. “It was such a small action”, wrote Dora who worked in a rest home, “but I found I could make a difference”.

As Dudley (2007) has shown in a Canadian context, participation in a community provides many authentic opportunities for assessing and considering linguistic transactions and cultural moments. These moments may lead students to a deeper appreciation of the commitment and practices of people who are members of their community of practice, and hence of wider society. Such moments may also lead learners to a deeper appreciation of their place within the host culture, and of their potential as agents in the world of human and humane activity. Partaking in a community placement can help to facilitate desires for integration, membership and belonging. In 16 cases, students gained so much from the experience of placement that they desired to remain in that community of practice. For example, one Korean woman who was placed as a volunteer with the New Zealand police has qualified as an interpreter so that she can fulfil the liaison work

she had started in the Korean community in Auckland during her placement, and a Chinese woman, Dany, imagines herself doing the same for her community.

Understanding one's own imagined future self and representing it to your learning community can, as we have seen, have unforeseen positive outcomes.

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