Community-Engagement as an Innovative Way to Revitalize Language Programs

Sandie Blaise

Abstract Community-based programs provide innovative ways for students to develop language and cultural skills while making a social impact. This contribution will discuss a new course to be offered at Princeton University in spring 2023, which aims to revitalize the French language program by enhancing student learning in real-world contexts and emphasizing the relevance of language skills through meaningful work. This chapter will briefly define community-based language learning and its impact on student learning and motivation, describe the course's content, assessment, and the students' expected learning outcomes. In "Migration, Diversity, Diaspora: Francophone Community-Engagement," students will engage in civic service, interact with native or heritage speakers, and critically reflect in French on issues of diversity, equity, and social justice. By the end of the course, they will have gained factual knowledge about patterns of migration in the francophone world, will have a better understanding of the challenges of resettlement and the complexities of real-life situations of multilingualism. Through collaboration with community partners, they will also have opportunities to grow as critical cosmopolitan citizens, develop their problem-solving skills and intercultural competence, and use French as a tool for social change.

Keywords Community engagement · French · Critical pedagogy · Cosmopolitanism · Social justice

1 Community-Engagement as an Innovative Way to Revitalize Language Programs

After a delayed start due to the pandemic, the French Language Program at Princeton University will offer its first course engaging students of French in community outreach in spring 2023. This project responds to a need to revitalize language

S. Blaise (✉)
Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA
e-mail: sblaise@princeton.edu

programs by enhancing student learning in real-world contexts and emphasizing the relevance of language skills through meaningful work. By promoting civic service, interaction with native or heritage speakers, and critical reflection in the target language on issues of diversity, equity, and social justice, community-based programs provide new ways for students to develop language and cultural skills while making a social impact. At Princeton University, "Migration, Diversity, Diaspora: Francophone Community-Engagement" will address a gap in the curriculum and offer an opportunity for students to use French as a tool for change in local communities. After briefly defining community-based language learning and its impact on student learning and motivation, I will describe the course, assessment, and expected learning outcomes.

Coined by Clifford and Reisinger (2019), community-based language learning (CBLL) stems from community-based learning (CBL), "an umbrella term that provides models of how to engage in curricular and co-curricular experiences with local communities" (p.6). Considered a high-impact educational practice by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, CBL "increase[s] the odds that students will invest time and effort; participate in active challenging experiences; experience diversity; interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters; receive more frequent feedback; and discover the relevance of their learning through real-world experiences" (Jacoby, 2015, p.11). The learning goals of civic engagement are multifold: collaborating with local communities "transform[s] worldviews, highlight[s] social issues, co-create[s] knowledge, and foster[s] authentic relationships based on connection" (Clifford & Reisinger, 2019, p.6). However, while English is the main language in CBL, CBLL takes place in the target language, at least in part, between students and heritage or native speakers. This distinction creates specific challenges, but it also allows students to harness language learning with social impact and, much like in CBL, students show increased motivation. Indeed, research has shown that language students involved in community-based learning are more motivated and more positive toward the target language (Clifford & Reisinger, 2019, p.30). By engaging students in meaningful work that positively impacts their views on the language learning process, CBLL provides a unique opportunity to revitalize language programs.

The creation of "Migration, Diversity, Diaspora: Francophone Community-Engagement" follows a broader trend to connect students with local communities. At Princeton University, courses integrating a community-engagement learning component already exist in other language departments, but it will be the first of its kind to be offered in French. Organized in collaboration with the Program for Community-Engaged Scholarship at Princeton University, the course will provide students opportunities to use French as a tool to better understand the complexities of social issues, acquire intercultural and professional competences, and build ethical and sustainable partnerships with local organizations working with French speakers, such as the French Heritage Language Program, the Princeton YWCA, and Refugee Assistance Partners of New Jersey.

One of the goals of the course is to enable students to grow as reflective, socially responsible, and critical individuals. As such, it aligns itself within critical

pedagogies (see Dasli & Diaz, 2018) and aims to develop students' intercultural competence (Byram & Zarate, 1994; Byram, 1997; Risager, 2007; Sobré-Denton & Bardhan, 2013) by dismantling essentialist views of culture and reflecting on diversity and transnational identities. To better understand some of the challenges faced by members of local French-speaking communities, students will learn about global displacement of French-speaking populations, and more particularly diasporas in the New York/New Jersey area. They will explore contemporary issues including resettlement, transnationalism, multilingualism, and language maintenance. They will examine linguistic ideologies and discrimination to question the interconnectedness of language, identity, and power. Students will also engage with recordings, images, and magazine covers, to analyze the various representations of migrants in public discourse and dismantle stereotypes and othering practices. Additional materials will include articles, videos, movies, documentaries, and graphic novels. Set within critical pedagogies, the course aims to train students to become "critical cosmopolitan citizens" (Osler & Starkey, 2015) able to appreciate difference, engage with cultural Others (Sobré-Denton & Bardhan, 2013), move between discourse communities across languages and cultures (Byram, 1997), and reflect on issues of diversity and inequities to envision a fairer and more democratic world (Brookfield, 2005, p.27).

Student learning will be evaluated through formative, summative, and multi-modal assessments targeting the three modes of communication (interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive). As an example of formative assessment, they will keep a journal of their reflections on the materials studied in class and their experience and interaction with members of the local communities. To guide student critical thinking, the instructor will provide written prompts following Ash & Clayton's DEAL (Describe, Examine, Articulate Learning) model (Ash & Clayton, 2009, pp.39–40). Thanks to this journal, both students and instructors will be able to see how students' vision and understanding of migration, identity, cultural norms evolve over the course of the semester. Students will also give presentations on francophone diasporas in the United States and the NJ/NY region, which will inform their contribution to a blog designed to share relevant information and resources gathered throughout the semester for future students of the course and community partners.

In their seminal book on CBLL, Clifford and Reisinger raise the importance of "soliciting and including community partners' input" and "mov[ing] the CBLL experience from a charity model that services the organization and its clients to a more engaged partnership that trains students to work for social change" (2019, p.37). In some instances, this may involve using English as the main language to carry out projects that match the organization's needs. Following this model, we created assignments that aligned with community partners' input and expectations. More particularly, the final project challenges the charity model and trains students to become change makers: they will interview community members, identify successful programs and current needs, and prepare a proposal for future community-engagement services that they will present to community partners. To prepare this field work and proposal, we will introduce students to methodological and ethical

aspects of qualitative research and data collection. While students may not develop language skills through this project as most of the interviewing process and presentation will take place in English, it will still enable them to "develop intercultural competence and deepen knowledge about the community" (2019, p.37). It will also allow them to actively participate in the foundations of the community-engagement program and acquire highly transferable skills while serving the needs of the local organizations. Future projects could also include oral history, and the translation of health brochures into French.

By the end of the course, students will have gained factual knowledge about the francophone world and its patterns of migration. They will have conducted individual and group projects according to the needs identified and discussed with the community partners, developing their problem-solving skills, leadership abilities and intercultural competence. They will have a better understanding of the social, cultural, and linguistic challenges of resettlement and will have acquired valuable insights into the complexities of real-life situations of multilingualism and migration. They will have had opportunities to reflect on issues of diversity, inclusion, and social justice, and to grow as critical cosmopolitan citizens. Finally, we hope that they will see French in a new light and, as a result, will renew their interest in the language while using their linguistic and cultural knowledge as a tool for change to continue working towards a more inclusive world.

References

Ash, S., & Clayton, P. (2009). Generating, deepening and documenting learning: The power of critical reflection in applied learning. *Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education, 1*, 25–48.

Brookfield, S. (2005). *The power of critical theory for adult learning and teaching*. Open University Press.

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M., & Zarate, G. (1994). *Definitions, objectives and assessment of socio-cultural competence*. Council of Europe.

Clifford, J., & Reisinger, D. (2019). *Community-based language learning: A framework for educators*. Georgetown University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv7cjw41

Dasli, M., & Diaz, A. R. (2018). *The critical turn in language and intercultural communication pedagogy: Theory, research and practice*. Routledge.

Jacoby, B. (2015). *Service-learning essentials: Questions, answers, and lessons learned*. Jossey-Bass.

Osler, A., & Starkey, H. (2015). Education for cosmopolitan citizenship: A framework for language learning. *Argentinian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 3*(2), 30–39.

Risager, K. (2007). *Language and culture pedagogy: From a national to a transnational paradigm*. Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853599613

Sobré-Denton, M., & Bardhan, N. (2013). *Cultivating cosmopolitanism for intercultural communication: Communicating as a global citizen*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203078150