Chapter 2
Experiential Learning, Service Learning, and Engagement in a University ESL Setting: The Graduate Cohort Program

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines experiential and service learning in the context of an intensive English program for international graduate students, the goal of which is to foster engagement and cultural integration. The service learning project brings together skills in using English in authentic situations, researching, working as a team, communicating with members of the community they would not otherwise have contact with, presenting their project to their peers, and writing a reflection. Evidence is presented in the form of a description and analysis of the program and project, together with interviews with graduate mentors and excerpts from students’ reflective writing. It is shown that the project has positive outcomes in terms of increased engagement and development of skills required for successful graduate study in a North American setting.

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INTRODUCTION

A large influx of international students to English-language graduate programs has created new challenges for their integration into mainstream academic culture. Throughout the English-speaking world, universities have tried a number of approaches to bridge the gaps between students’ native culture and the one they have chosen for advanced study. This chapter examines a service learning model that is built into a study skills and cultural integration program, which is in turn part of an English as a Second Language program at a large North American public university. It posits that service learning projects provide unique and valuable experiences in the local cultural context, facilitating students’ development of skills necessary for integration into the local and academic communities, and for full participation in their graduate programs. The text describes and analyzed a program currently in place at the University of Delaware. To supplement the text, students’ reflective samples and excerpts from interviews with graduate mentors are used to support claims of the value of the program.

First, the service learning project is put into the general context of the larger program, known as the Graduate Cohort Program, through a general overview of the program and its goals. Then the concept of engagement, defined as a positive attitude towards learning, and as making connections in the local and academic communities, is discussed. Following this, the program’s focus on experiential learning and service learning are described and analyzed. Experiential learning in the Graduate Cohort Program includes all activities outside the ESL classroom, including graduate class observations, writing center and library orientations, and social and cultural experiences facilitated by instructors or mentors. Service learning refers to a specialized form of experiential learning, highlighting civic or ethical responsibility with action in the community. Goals of service learning include authentic and meaningful language interaction with persons in the community that students would otherwise not have met, strengthening ties to the local and academic communities, and developing social and ethical awareness of global issues and how they affect local communities. These projects also extend a reading assignment into real life, allow more meaningful classroom discussions, support a research project, and provide a basis for a reflective group presentation and personal reflective writing. The service learning projects increase students’ proficiency in English, strengthen bonds between cohort members, and provide unique opportunities to make connections with their communities.
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