

# Local Intercultural Exchanges: Using Project-Based Language Learning (PBL) to Increase Impact and Engagement

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## Tags

Adult Education; Cross-Cultural Issues; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Experiential Education; Language Education; Partnerships; Program Design; University/Higher Education

## Setting

An intercultural exchange program is run in partnership between two instructors teaching parallel courses at a graduate school and a nearby community college. The two courses are *Spanish in the Community* at the graduate school and *English in the Community* at the community college. All the students in the English class are native speakers of Spanish and most of them work or live with workers in the agricultural industry. Students in the Spanish class travel on Fridays for 20 miles and meet for three hours with students in the English class on the grounds of the community college.

The graduate school is in the western United States in a coastal town, and the community college is located in an inland city, at the epicenter of the agricultural industry. There is an economic divide between the two areas, called the "lettuce curtain." The inland region is one of the most productive agricultural areas in the United States, particularly for growing lettuce. However, the prosperity generated by this industry has not been evenly distributed among the region's inhabitants. One side of the "lettuce curtain" includes wealthy coastal communities with access to better education, healthcare, and social services. The other side includes communities that consist mostly of agricultural workers, many of whom are low-wage earners and migrants.

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These communities often face challenges such as substandard living conditions, limited access to quality education and healthcare, and sometimes, exploitation in the form of low wages and poor working conditions.

In this academic partnership, the two courses allow language learners to collaborate on a weekly basis through a curriculum that seeks to strengthen listening, interpersonal, and intercultural skills beyond mere conversational practice (Little, 2001). The program was created a decade ago with these premises in mind:

- Intercultural exchanges should be at the core of the language curriculum
- Spanish is not a foreign language in the US (Torres, 2017)
- There is a need for language skills in the community
- Education has the power to tear away the “lettuce curtain”

In the program, students collaborate in English and Spanish for ten sessions and work on a final project during the last weeks of classes. This project is presented at a symposium, which is intended as the climax of the semester. The program aspires to have an impact in the community, transcending the walls of the language classroom. Despite its consolidation in the curriculum of both universities, the program still grapples with several issues, such as the limited societal impact of its final project.

## Case

In the past, the curriculum for this program borrowed from varied approaches to second language teaching including tandem learning, virtual exchanges, service-learning, and the Growing Participant Approach. While useful, these methodologies did not pedagogically feed the final project, which had only a peripheral presence and value in the curriculum. The projects and presentations rarely left the classroom and students’ engagement in the project tended to be superficial, according to the instructors.

To tackle the shortcomings of the final project, the program organizers decided to adopt a new approach, embracing the principles and methodology of Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL). In PBLL, teachers guide students through the creation and execution of real-world projects that require them to collaborate and create a “public product” for a community partner while developing their language skills. These projects involve ongoing collaboration, feedback, and engagement with authentic materials, and scenarios, often leading to greater student motivation and engagement.

To prepare, one of the instructors completed a course on PBLL and participated in the 2023 PBLL in Action Summer Institute at the National Foreign Language Resource Center (NFLRC). The practical nature of these trainings allowed the instructor to deeply engage with PBLL and revamp the curriculum for their program. The training led to this revised framing of the final project:

- *Challenge*: How can we, as intermediate and advanced learners of Spanish and English, promote opportunities for professional development in our county?
- *Authentic, real-world purpose*: Workers in the field face many obstacles that prevent them from accessing resources for professional development.
- *Community partner*: County Free Libraries.
- *Public product*: “Professional Pathfinder”, a digital and paper-based booklet with useful information in Spanish and English for community members who are seeking professional development opportunities in the community.

The public product was defined in conversations with the community partner, who joined the first class session to set the context, provide a sense of purpose, and help students understand why the project is worth doing. The instructors reported high enthusiasm among students, and their weekly reflections also evidenced a genuine desire to contribute to the project.

After five weeks, engagement was strong and students were actively researching opportunities in small groups. Groups were working on mapping the different companies who hire in the region, creating a guide on how to apply for a job and participate in an interview, providing technology tips for job seekers, and curating useful resources for professionals in the county. Looking forward to the end of the revised course, the program organizers were optimistic that the public product would be useful for the partner and were satisfied with the PBL format as a tool to increase motivation and impact.

## Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Based on what you know, do you think this program will achieve its aims for language learning? For engaging students? For social impact? Why or why not?
- What cross-cultural issues could affect this program?
- What power dynamics may be happening in this scenario? How can they be addressed?
  - How can the instructors ensure that there is equal learning for the students studying English and the student studying Spanish?
  - How can the program ensure that it is not perpetuating a "savior complex", where the graduate students may feel they are "rescuing" the inland community?
- What are the strengths, challenges, opportunities, and risks of Project-Based Language Learning (PBL) in the context of intercultural exchange?
- What metrics can be used to evaluate the impact of the "public product" created for the community partner?
- Imagining future semesters, what public projects might be appropriate for this course? What organizations might be good community partners?
- How could the program ensure continuity and lasting impact in the community, especially considering its semester-based nature?

## References

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