🌐 Foreign/Second Language:
Language and Community

What if language practice helped students think about community?

Ben taught high school Spanish. He began to notice a pattern in how his students responded to some of the assignments in the textbook, and he wanted to see if he could encourage a less self-centered approach.

"I noticed that in some of the assignments that asked students to give a personal response, their default tendency was to focus on themselves. It also seemed to me that this was not entirely their fault—the way the assignments were set up did not discourage such a response. I started making changes to make them consider others' perspectives more.

"One example involved talking about school subjects in connection with likes and dislikes; if I wasn't careful, I would hear a chorus of 'I like math' or 'I hate biology,' sometimes said with some gusto as definitive judgments. To broaden the perspective a little, I asked them to briefly interview a few people in their family or on their street about what subjects they had liked when they were in school, and to report back in simple language the next day ('My father said, "I like chemistry"').

"Another time, the unit required students to produce a short paper about their town. I was struck by how many students found it hard to say much at all, or declared that their town was 'boring' with 'nothing to do.' To get away from this and move beyond just listing names of key buildings, I provided a list of different groups in the community: the elderly, small children, parents, people of faith, nature lovers, and so on. I asked students to write about what aspects of the town each of these people would find valuable. I also asked them to find a person from at least two of the categories and to ask what that person's favorite aspect of the town was. I wanted them to think about the town as a broader community, not just as there to serve their individual needs. We talked briefly about the difference between this and just looking at the town as stores and entertainment."

What's going on here?

Ben saw his foreign language lesson as a way of helping his students think in terms of the perspectives and needs of others in the community rather than focusing on themselves.

He engaged students in actively attending to how others thought about the topics at hand and in focusing on others in their speaking and writing tasks.

Ben reshaped his practice by choosing a new frame for the learning activities and by assigning concrete ways of focusing outward and connecting with the community.

How do I do this myself?

- Elementary example

- Secondary example

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

The Bible encourages people to love their surrounding community, to pray for it, and to work for its well-being. Christian faith calls us to focus not just on ourselves and our own needs and preferences, but on the needs of others and the role that we can play in a larger community. Ben also sought to expand his students' view of the needs served by their local community to include the needs of people of faith.

What difference does it make?

The changes that Ben made did not change the language being learned; his students were still practicing the same phrases. However, he found a way of teaching the material that also challenged self-centered perspectives about the local community and connected students' learning to their awareness of the needs of others around them.

Digging deeper

Christian community is based on all being one in Christ and expressing that oneness in a compassionate lifestyle (Romans 12:9-10). It is lived in supporting each other, in working together for others, and in giving of time, wealth, and self.

Not only are Christians called to be in community, they are called to serve as a community. Service should distinguish the Christian way of life at work, in the home, and in relationships. The Bible calls people to serve their wider communities and work for their well-being (Jeremiah 29:7), fostering love and justice. The Bible calls on Christians to be good citizens, always ready to do good and living at peace with neighbors. Jesus made it clear that in the kingdom of God those who are greatest are those who serve God and others (Matthew 20:26)

> *One of the principal rules of religion is, to lose no occasion of serving God. And, since he is invisible to our eyes, we are to serve him in our neighbor; which he receives as if done to himself in person, standing visibly before us. John Wesley*

> *The duty is now emphasized of serving God in the world, in every position in life. Abraham Kuyper*

Our society looks for freedom and happiness in wealth, fame, and power. The Bible sees it in giving and serving others. One Episcopalian prayer describes the service of God as "perfect freedom." Those words translate cui servire, regnare est, "To serve is to reign." To serve God and others is the highest honor; it is what we were created for.

> *One thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve. Albert Schweitzer*