

Forum: The Power of Partnership*(Part 3 of 3)*

Providing English Language Classes Through Partnership

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“According to 2018 American Community Survey data, there are 25.6 million children, youth, and adults who speak English less than very well in the United States. Of those, 11.4 million are adults ages 18 and older. Data on the federally funded adult education system under the Workforce Innovation Act (WIOA) Title II show that programs have served fewer than one million of these adults in ESOL classes per year over the last 10 years.”
(Uvin et al., 2021)

As the facts in the quote above make clear, federally funded adult education programs serve only a fraction of the adults who need English language (ESL) classes. There are many reasons for this, including barriers related to cost, transportation, class schedule, childcare and family responsibilities, work schedule, access to technology, and digital skills (Bairamova & Dixon, 2019a; Patterson, 2018). Other barriers are more internal to learners and include anxiety or fear, a lack of confidence in themselves, motivation, and health concerns (Bairamova & Dixon, 2019b; Patterson & Wei, 2018).

One way that organizations serving adults with foundational skill needs such as English language can connect adult learners to those services is through partnerships. Many partnerships with adult education providers involve workforce development agencies but for adult English learners whose goals do not include employment, other partnerships are needed.

One such partnership in Portland, Oregon, that arose to meet a specific need not being addressed by existing programs is called the Community ESL Project, a partnership between an affordable housing organization serving seniors and a university training English language teachers.

How the Partnership Began

The Community ESL Project arose in 1995 when a group of high school students with a mission to improve English language instruction at schools across Portland, Oregon, approached the Leaders Roundtable. At the time, the Leaders Roundtable was an ad hoc group of top educational and private sector leaders and elected officials working toward the goal of student success in their local area. The students asserted that their English language instruction would improve with the participation of their parents, but that their parents' participation needed to be supported by improving their own English

skills. The Leaders Roundtable responded by establishing a partnership with Portland State University (PSU) and the department of Applied Linguistics which housed programs to train English language teachers. PSU and the Leaders Roundtable collaborated with the Schools Uniting Neighborhoods program which was established to create service hubs in low-income schools and their communities. In this partnership, the Leaders Roundtable representative would interact with the Schools Uniting Neighborhoods program coordinators to find space at each targeted school, identify a site coordinator, and recruit parents to the English classes. A PSU practicum coordinator would select and supervise English language teachers-in-training and liaise with the school site coordinator to provide local support for the teachers.

The Community ESL Project operated at 10-12 elementary, middle, and high school sites from 1995-2010. The innovative project was a finalist and received a cash prize of \$5,000 in 2009 from the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Partnership Award for Campus-Community Partnerships. The award showcases examples of campus-community partnerships with academic departments and interdisciplinary teams that leverage the resources of the university for the benefit of both the community and the university and enhance both research and student learning by developing and sustaining reciprocal teaching and/or research partnerships which are foundational to effective community engagement.

At the end of 2010, the Leaders Roundtable disbanded. The Community ESL Project became the Language Teaching Practicum and expanded to provide English language classes taught by English teachers-in-training to settings where they had not been before. Sites included a literacy organization and several affordable housing organizations including Rose Schnitzer Tower.

The Partners

Rose Schnitzer Tower

Built in 1980 by Schnitzer Properties (formerly Harsch Investment Properties), the Rose Schnitzer Tower building was the first high-rise apartment building in downtown Portland for low income seniors and other adults with disabilities. Currently, 40% of the building residents are English learners and 90% are older than 62. The building

is within walking distance from PSU. Schnitzer Properties has since sold the property to Cedar Sinai Park but continues to provide property management services including hiring resident service coordinators who work to connect residents to services through local partnerships. Examples of these partnerships include health services such as foot care and blood pressure checks, support groups of various kinds, information on the process for getting a caregiver, and English language classes.

Portland State University English Language Teaching Practicum

Portland State University is an urban serving university in downtown Portland, Oregon. The department of Applied Linguistics at PSU was formed in 1988, housing a Master's Degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages and a Teaching English as a Second Language certificate that can be completed in addition to an Applied Linguistics (or other) major or as a post-baccalaureate certificate. In addition to courses on language structure and use and language teaching and learning, a language teaching practicum is required.

The language teaching practicum plays an important role in teacher training programs focused on educating English language teachers (Farrell, 2008; Gebhard 2009). In a practicum, teachers-in-training apply what they have learned in their coursework by teaching their own class; teachers-in-training assess and respond to learner needs, create and implement lessons and materials, and adapt instruction based on formative assessments. Importantly, teachers-in-training work to build positive relationships, trust, and cooperation (Kamhi-Stein et al., 2020).

How the Partnership Works

The Language Teaching Practicum has been offering an ESL class onsite at Rose Schnitzer Tower since 2011 throughout each academic year, in fall, winter, and spring terms. Classes meet for 90 minutes, two times each week for 8 weeks each term. Classes were not held during 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The resident services coordinator at Rose Schnitzer Tower works to ensure that the services are available to residents in relevant languages, and at times and locations that work for the seniors. Specific to the English language class, the resident services coordinator advertises and recruits learners,

makes sure that textbooks are available, works to solve any access issues, and reserves an appropriate room for the class. With the increasing affordances of technology in language teaching, Rose Schnitzer Tower regularly upgrades the room where the English class is held.

To prepare to teach at the Rose Schnitzer Tower, the teacher-in-training observes at least one class the term prior to the term that they will teach. This helps to establish continuity as well as starts to build community with the learners. The incoming teacher-in-training meets at least one more time with the outgoing teacher-in-training and has full access to the assessments, curriculum, and lesson plans of the outgoing teacher-in-training as well as all previous teachers-in-training at Rose Schnitzer Tower. The incoming teacher also meets with the Resident Services Coordinator to get a tour of the facility and learn more about the building residents.

Weekly meetings with other teachers-in-training and the practicum supervisor provide guidance and support throughout the term. Each meeting includes information about teaching, often referring back to pedagogy classes, and discussion of the classroom teaching being experienced by the teachers-in-training. The teachers-in-training keep logs of the learners' attendance, their lesson plans, and reflections for each class. Through discussion and self-reflection, the new teachers learn to focus on the learners and discover how to gauge the teaching practices that are effective for the specific learners in their classroom. As seniors, the adult learners at Rose Schnitzer Tower are third-age learners and may have vision or hearing impairments and do not typically have English needs related to employment or the education of children, both common interests of younger adult English learners but instead have interests related to socializing with others and in learning for its own sake (Kacetyl & Klímová, 2021). Third-age learners such as the adult learners at Rose Schnitzer Tower benefit from instruction that leverages their knowledge and experience, in informal ways that is not driven by the need to cover a certain curriculum. The teacher-in-training at Rose Schnitzer Tower designs curriculum, lessons, and activities that meet the needs of the third-age learners in the classroom.

The teachers-in-training receive feedback on their lesson design from the practicum supervisor early in the term and the practicum supervisor observes each teacher-

in-training about half way through the term to provide feedback on the teaching. The teachers-in-training select one more way to get feedback based on the specific teaching aspect they are working on, which could be an additional observation, an observation of a peer focused on a specific question, a reading, an individual consultation with the supervisor, or other method of their choice, all with the goal of meeting the needs of the adult learners in their classes.

Opportunities and Challenges

The partnership between Rose Schnitzer Tower and the PSU Language Teaching practicum provides many benefits to both the adult learners and to the English teachers-in-training. For example,

- The English teachers-in-training have an opportunity to teach their own class of adult English learners. They create lessons and materials to meet the needs of the adult learners in their classes with the support of colleagues and supervisor.
- The senior adult English learners get English classes that meet their needs, at no cost to them, at their location. They look forward to ESL classes resuming in the fall (no classes are held during the summer because of the university schedule).
- The adult learners do not have to be U.S. citizens and English learning can help those who are applying to be U.S. citizens.

The partnership faces regular challenges. For example, the successful partnership

- requires coordination between the practicum supervisor employed at the university and the Resident Services Coordinator employed at the affordable housing organization. This can be especially challenging if there is frequent turnover in either role.
- requires getting the word out to elderly residents which is an ongoing struggle, especially if the day and time of the class changes. Attendance sometimes suffers.
- struggles when health issues cause irregular attendance of learners.
- requires teachers-in-training who are warm and friendly, flexible, and with a sense of humor; their

personality makes a big difference to attendance in the ESL classes.

Conclusion

The low-income seniors living at Rose Schnitzer Tower have goals and interests not typical of WIOA Title II funded programs generally focused on employability (Belzer & Kim, 2018) that “might feel pressure to enroll only learners whose goals align with WIOA core measures, leaving beginning-level learners and adults not in the workforce underserved” (Vaneck et al., 2020, p. 42). In addition, the learners’ mobility limitations make it difficult to travel to locations where those programs are held

while vision and hearing impairments require pedagogical adjustments that may be difficult to accommodate in larger programs. As a result, a local partnership can serve to meet the needs of these senior adult English learners.

The partnership has worked for more than 25 years because it changes to meet the needs of both adult English language learners and English teachers-in-training. It is supported by ongoing communication between the resident services coordinator in the building and the practicum supervisor at the university. Annual meetings at the end of each academic year serve as a review of what worked and what did not and where adjustments are made to ensure that the partnership continues to meet the needs of both partners.

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