Program Overview

In summer 2000 Pitzer College implemented a Spanish language program connecting the classroom with a community of native speakers in Ontario, California, a city of 163,000 east of Los Angeles with a rapidly growing Latino population. The development of this partnership had started in September 1999 when a student assistant, rooted in the cultures of the area, and I began to search for the right community setting for the program. I interviewed many residents of several Ontario neighborhoods as potential *promotoras* (female heads of households who were to assist us by acting as “promoters” of Spanish language and culture) and met with staff members of several community organizations. In April 2000—for a number of reasons including their deep interest in the program, exclusive use of Spanish in the household, and strong family life—we selected *promotoras* from the pool of parents who were active in a primary school located in a 3.5 square mile area known as the Sultana Corridor. We proceeded to design the program’s operation and curriculum with the help of this group of individuals who were not represented by, and did not represent any, official community organization. A program based on direct interaction with individuals rather than mediated by a social service organization has had both advantages and disadvantages, many of which will be touched on in this article.

Hosted by a *promotora*, students are received into the homes of immigrant Mexican families for discussion, community exploration, and participation in family activities. During the academic year, this experience is offered as a practicum for 30 students per semester, and with the exception of beginning students, it accommodates various levels of proficiency. Many students enroll concurrently in an appropriate formal language class. In the summer, 15-20 students participate in intensive eight-week formal classes at both beginning and intermediate levels. They engage in formal two-hour visits twice a week during the summer and once a week during the academic year. Informally, they often extend their visits or engage in ancillary activities with “their” families on other days. They visit in groups of three, usually traveling together from campus, thus using the travel time for discussions in Spanish. Half of the students enroll in the class for a second semester, generally visiting the same family, and some have even kept up this contact after graduation.

The initial group of *promotoras* continued to participate through the three years of the program until summer 2003 when two of the six moved to other neighborhoods and one lost interest. The remaining group has recommended other neighbors to take their places. Some *promotoras* work out better than others because of their personalities, values, motivation, and the benefits they feel they receive from the partnership. There seems to be a cycle of engagement that depends on continuing interest, participation in other activities, the importance of the stipend for the household, benefits for their children, and life changes. The *promotoras* that have kept working for the entire three years have found new ways to benefit from their contacts with

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Outcomes for Community Partners in an Unmediated Service-Learning Program

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Pitzer College’s Spanish service-learning program is unmediated by local social service organizations. It directly places students with immigrant Mexican families living in nearby Ontario, California. Based on the concept that language is a social practice and culture should be the core of language teaching, it has developed long-term, mutually beneficial relationships among college and community partners. A space has been created to support dialogues across race, class, and privilege boundaries. This article focuses on the program’s impact on community participants, whose homes are becoming neighborhood hubs of an informal informational resource network. Perhaps the weak ties between two seemingly incompatible social networks account for the ease with which this process was established. A program originally centered on pedagogy is slowly effecting small-scale social change and community development.
the college. Some who have left temporarily have nevertheless maintained loose connections with the faculty and the other promotoras, for whom they sometimes act as substitutes.

In the beginning, because of the collaborative process for designing the program structure and curriculum, faculty met with the promotoras often, but now do so only as needed. However, with the help of continuing students, we provide an extensive orientation for all new students at the beginning of every class. Most of the students are very satisfied with their experiences, but each semester approximately 10% are somewhat dissatisfied. The reasons are varied and complex, some relating to personality clashes, or the inability to be active learners or take risks. Students are encouraged to be in charge of their own learning. A personal dialogue between each student and the faculty is established through monthly encuentros (gatherings) and weekly journals. A general introduction to the community and an initiation to ethical concerns involved in engaging of community partners are provided. While specific issues change each semester, we expect that, due to their intense interactions with the promotoras and their families, students will become generally concerned about immigration, gender, schooling, bilingualism, power, ethics, etc. Later, as they become more familiar and comfortable with the environment, students begin to think about “service” and what it means in such a reciprocal context.

This article draws from a larger long-term continuing ethnographic study focused on community-engaged language learning. The data that informs it was gathered during the last three years from students’ journals, formative evaluation questionnaires, verbal debriefings, focus groups, individual interviews (taped and transcribed), and my own notes as a participant observer. Also, the promotoras were interviewed twice—once in summer 2000 and again in summer 2002. The tapes in Spanish were transcribed by native speakers. Our conclusions and analysis were reviewed by all the stakeholders; excerpts from the promotoras’ interviews used in this paper represent the group’s perceptions, but have been chosen because of their excellent articulation of the issues. It should be noted that since this is an evolving program, many statements represent the thoughts and feelings prevalent at particular moments in time. This qualitative and interpretative analysis encompasses nine semesters (including summers), from summer 2000 through summer 2003.

During this period, 195 students participated in the program; they were predominantly European American, with smaller numbers of Asian American, African American, and some Hispanics who were learning Spanish as a second language. Not all, but most students were of middle class origin. The students’ journals and evaluation forms reveal that, as a result of their participation in the program, they gained confidence using Spanish to the point of being able to provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, exchange opinions, and present concepts and ideas on various topics. The journals also show that students were able to develop empathy and respect for people of other cultures and particular individuals. Additionally, they became aware of the impact they had on community members and the community’s impact on them, and developed analytical skills to explore the connections among personal, interpersonal, community, and large scale sociopolitical transformations.

This article addresses particularly the promotoras’ perceptions. Initial observations point to an increased sense of agency, developing self worth and social esteem, and a greater understanding of how mainstream society functions. The experience has opened new doors and opportunities, and has permitted college students to serve as role models for the families’ children, who, in turn, have increased college aspirations. Moreover, it appears that the promotoras’ homes are in the process of being established as hubs of an informal informational resource network within the neighborhood. Because of the strong reciprocal relationships that the promotoras have developed with the privileged, formally educated college students and the faculty, they are building a capacity to assist their neighbors in identifying and utilizing social programs and resources not otherwise accessible or attainable. Thus, a program originally primarily focused on pedagogy is slowly evolving to potentially effect small-scale social change and community development.

In recent years, college educators have seen the value of integrating community-based and service-learning activities with formal second language acquisition classes. This integration has been particularly attractive to teachers of Spanish who have been active in connecting their classrooms with neighboring Spanish-speaking communities, a goal advanced by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Language in its new Standards for Foreign Language Education (ACTFL Special Project, 1999). The resources of such communities have been seen as avenues to explore interdisciplinary content, affirm the intrinsic relationship between language and culture, and encourage students to engage multilingual and multicultural communities at home and around the world. Advocates of com-
munity-based language acquisition argue that it can create a new framework for language learning that has implications for theory, research, and practice (Phillips & Terry, 1998).

Various efforts have been undertaken to collect and evaluate experiences, concepts, and models of service-learning in Spanish (Hellebrant & Varona, 1999), discuss and share findings within a national community of educators (American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese), and examine implications for disciplinary epistemology (Arries, 1999; Hale, 1999; Mullaney, 1999; Reagan & Osborn, 2002; Varona, 1999). These efforts have begun to address some of the many issues involved in moving service-learning from general discussion to specific disciplinary discourse (Zlotowski, 2000). To date, most attention has been directed to the impact of such programs on student learning; however, insufficient note has been made of the impact this collaboration has on community partners. This article focuses on the community participants’ perceptions of their involvement in the pedagogical process and seeks to identify the significant outcomes and impacts for them and their neighbors.

Pitzer’s program design has drawn on methodologies from community-based research, action research, and anthropological fieldwork (Clifford, 1986; Stringer, 1997, 1999). It has used participant observation and neighborhood ethnography as tools in helping the participants understand each other and the context in which they are working. The program has evolved over three years, through regular input from students and close collaboration with community partners. Fundamental to this evolution was exploring the intersection between foreign language education and critical pedagogy, focusing attention on the context in which language learning takes place and on a curriculum that is not campus-centered and controlled. A deceptively simple but very crucial contribution to this approach was recognizing language as social practice within the context of a community of speakers.

One theoretical base for this pedagogy evolves from experiences with community-based and experiential learning in the American tradition: democratic education and schooling, integration of practice and theory, support for reflective action and experience, and literacy instruction as a basis for social change (Cummings, 2000; Dewey, 1942; Harkavy & Benson, 1998; Horton, 1990). Another comes from the Brazilian Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of dialogue, ideas about the learner as a subject of knowledge, and the connection between personal and social transformation (1998, 1998b).

This program explores a model of academic service-learning that directly connects the knowledge and assets of two communities: college students and neighborhood residents. Based on the concept that language is a social practice and culture should be the core of language teaching, the program aims for collaboratively constructing a language learning community through the developing of long-term, mutually beneficial relationships among the college and community partners. A central goal is developing personal bonds that foster meaningful language practice. But the program fosters outcomes that go beyond oral proficiency; participants acquire a better understanding of such factors as cultural diversity, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, empathy, and civic responsibility in a shared world.

The Pitzer program brings these communities together in the context of their everyday lives and the surrounding Spanish-speaking neighborhood. It offers a safe, semi-controlled space where people from different cultural backgrounds, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic status, who would ordinarily never meet, are able to interact in a mutually beneficial way. Activities foster an ethical approach to college/community involvement based on developing positive social relationships and personal growth for all participants. In this space, the promotoras’ control of the home, family relationships, and language spoken allows a more equitable negotiation of power, somewhat diminishing the disparity in power between the students and promotoras that exists in the broader society. They are free to negotiate and share power, creating reciprocal exchanges, with each retaining agency. This model of academic service-learning is conceived not as a process for defining and solving problems, but to build relationships in which all can benefit. Students gain language proficiency, new understandings about a specific community of Spanish speakers, and insights into the complexity of cultures and processes of personal and social change. An examination of what the promotoras and their families gain, and some of the challenges we all faced, follows.

The Promotoras’ Perceptions

The promotoras are first-generation Mexican immigrant women who have lived in the United States for some time and now reside in a 3.5 square mile area in Ontario, California known as the Sultana Corridor. This region’s population is about 27,000, over 80% of whom are Latino. In April 2000, the promotoras were selected from the pool of parents who were active in the Sultana Elementary School. The school offers a strong bilingual program for the students, 87% of whom
are estimated to come from Spanish-speaking families. The arrival of young immigrant families from Mexico and Central America has swelled Ontario’s Spanish-speaking population to more than half (52%) in recent years, an increase of over 25% since 1980. While the city as a whole has prospered in the last decade, most residents in areas like Sultana are employed in low-wage service jobs.

The *promotoras* have many household and family responsibilities. They are religious, and most are Catholic. All have a primary school education, but only one has graduated from a Mexican high school. Only one spoke any English when the program began, and they all had minimal interaction with people outside Sultana because shopping and the acquisition of essential services can be conducted solely in Spanish there. Six *promotoras* began the program, following a visit with their extended families to the Pitzer campus in June 2000. A seventh *promotora* was chosen in summer 2002. These families were selected because they were stable, long-time residents in a community near the College and lived in households where only Spanish was spoken.

The project was initially attractive to the *promotoras* because they thought it would enable their children to meet and interact with college students for the first time. From the beginning, they were interested in information about college. They also were intrigued with the challenge of taking on responsibilities beyond the normal scope of their duties as housekeepers. They expressed a desire to serve, to learn from, and to interact with people different from themselves. They were attracted to the opportunity to “teach” people who they believed to be “more educated.” Only later, well after they had begun their duties as housekeepers, did the *promotoras* learn that they would receive a small stipend. This payment not only gave dignity and recognition to their contribution, but also strengthened their motivation and sense of responsibility. Finally, because they were encouraged to collaborate in developing the curriculum and exploring their own teaching interests and methods, they took greater ownership of, and responsibility for, their part of the program.

Below I discuss the *promotoras’* perceptions, categorized by themes, that arose during interviews and focus groups I conducted with them.

*Exchange of Knowledge*

Many reciprocal relationships have developed among the students, *promotoras*, and families through the services rendered to each other.

Sí, a mí me ayudaron para sacar mi licencia, me ayudaron para inmigración, me llevaron, ¿te acuerdas? Y ahora me están ayudando a conseguirme una computadora.

Yes, they helped me to get my driver’s license, they helped me with immigration questions, they took me there, do you remember? And now they are helping me to get information about buying a computer. (*promotora* # 1, taped interview, 1/13/03)

This rich exchange of knowledge becomes even more meaningful through its connection to naturally occurring issues and the emotionally charged network of relationships.

Me llenaba mucho de alegría saber que ellos me enseñaron cosas que yo ignoraba, como yo no tuve mucho estudio, yo ignoraba la importancia que tiene…yo no les inculcaba mucho la lectura (a los niños), en la escuela yo sé que es muy importante…pero yo no los motivaba, y no les decía, “ya vamos a leer” o algo. Y desde que ellos me dijeron la importancia de la lectura…poquito a poquito he estado incluyendo la lectura antes de dormirme. Esto fue una de las cosas más importantes que yo les agradezco que me dijeran, porque yo no sabía que la lectura era tan importante para tener un nivel tan alto en cualquier materia o cualquier situación que ellos vayan a estudiar.

It filled me with a lot of happiness knowing that they taught me things about which I knew nothing, because I don’t have much education, I didn’t realize its importance…I didn’t instill in the kids a love of reading, I know it’s very important in school…but I didn’t motivate them, I didn’t tell them “let’s read together” or something. And since they told me about the importance of reading…little by little I am including reading before going to bed. This was one of the most important things that I am grateful to them for telling me, because I did not know that reading was so important to reach a much higher level in whatever subject or whatever situation they are going to study. (*promotora* # 2, taped interview, 1/21/03)

The diversity of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, age, political views, and personalities among all participants adds greater richness to that exchange.

Ahora que ellos vienen aprendí a convivir más…porque yo pensaba que los chinos no se llevaban con los mexicanos, o los de otro color. Ahora que los tengo todos yo no creo que iba a convivir con tantas personas así, sin importar la raza o la edad...(los vecinos) saben que yo no hablo inglés…se hace extraño ver que aquí en mi casa vienen chinos, vienen americanos…pero con los muchachos se llevan bien.
Now that they are coming, I have learned to coexist with others more...because I thought that Asians would not get along with Mexicans or people of other colors. Now that I have them all I didn’t think that I would coexist with so many people like this, without caring about race or age...the neighbors know that I don’t speak English...it is strange to see Asians and Americans coming to my house...but they get along with the students. (promotora #5, taped interview, 8/10/00)

Self-Esteem

Within the resultant profound interactions, the promotoras have developed a sense of self-esteem and worth by meeting the challenge of hosting the students, developing warm caring relationships, and being recognized for their efforts.

La experiencia que tuve con los muchachos fue muy agradable porque me sentí que yo todavía podía dar algo de lo que tengo, de lo que sé; me ayudó para que yo viera que todavía valgo un poquito más; yo sé que lo valgo como persona, como mujer, pero que yo tenga algo que puedo dar.

The experience that I had with the kids was very agreeable because I felt that I still could give something of what I have, of what I know. It helped me to see that I am worth a little bit more; I know I am worthy as a person, as a woman, but I have something more that I can give. (promotora #6, taped interview, 8/10/00)

In some cases, their husbands and extended family, “comadres” (their children’s godmothers), friends, and neighbors contributed to this increased feeling of self worth by speaking with admiration that the promotoras were helping “college students” practice Spanish.

Benefit for Children

The promotoras also mention the positive impact that the visits have had on their children.

Me ayudó también mucho a convivir con ellos que son de diferente cultura, son de diferentes costumbres, diferentes religiones y me gustó mucho tener las conversaciones y saber cómo piensan las demás personas en todos los aspectos; me gustó mucho porque los niños se motivaron mucho con ellos; les gustó mucho, los extrañaron siempre y están: ¿cuándo van a venir? ¿cuándo van a venir? Por ejemplo hoy es miércoles, ¿hoy no vienen? ¿Mañana vienen? ¿Y que vamos a hacer? ¿Adónde vamos a ir con ellos y qué les vamos a enseñar? Están muy motivados porque sí les ha gustado mucho y les ha motivado más al decir “yo quiero llegar al colegio donde ellos están.”

It helped me also to share with those who are from a different culture, different customs, and different religions. I like very much to have conversations and know how other people think about many subjects. I like it very much because the kids got quite motivated with them, they liked it very much, they always miss them, and they are always asking, “when will they come?” “when will they come?” For example, “today is Wednesday, are they coming? Tomorrow? And what are we going to do? Where are we going to go with them and what are we going to teach them?” They are very motivated because they liked it very much, and it has motivated them to say: “I want to go to the college where they are.” (promotora #6, taped interview, 8/10/00)

When the program started in summer of 2000, none of the promotoras’ children had thought about attending college. Now, all do. Many students and children develop strong personal relationships that continue even after the students graduate. The children look forward to the visits, waiting for help in some area of their homework. In time, they regard the student as part of the extended family. They eat, write, read, and go to the market together. They collaborate on science projects, and celebrate birthdays and communions. At the same time, the children offer help with the students’ language learning, serving as “walking dictionaries” and interpreters of the nuances of meanings and intentions in both English and Spanish. The children, initially perplexed about why the students would want to know Spanish while they struggle to learn English, come to value their bilingualism as a bridge between two worlds. Their “home” language takes on a new validity and importance as they interpret its subtleties for the “college students.”

This experience also brings college within view for children who before gave it little thought. For María, who was nine when the program began and is now twelve, college was a far removed place accessible only to those with great confidence and resources. Now she views her prospects differently.

Después de terminar el high school iba a empezar a trabajar pero ahora no pienso eso; tengo otras metas que ahora sé...es que antes las tenía pero no pensaba que las podría lograr; con Brook (una estudiante) conversábamos de cómo nos fue en el día como si fuéramos familia. Aprendí que lo puedo lograr aunque va a ser difícil.

After finishing high school, I thought I would work, but now I do not think that. I have other goals, since now I know...it is not that I did not have them (the goals) but I did not think I could reach them. With Brook (a female stu-
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Maria mentioned that she also gained the confidence to speak openly with Anglos and other ethnic groups. She came to appreciate that not all of them match her negative stereotypes. Likewise, she hoped that her interactions would convince the students not to think badly of all Mexicans. She said the experience had helped her live with other races (“convivir con otras razas”). María also recently has become vegetarian and developed a concern for the environment, sharing some of the inclinations of the visiting students.

Appreciation of Diversity

During these three years the promotoras have emerged from many controversies related to diversity and have achieved a renewed understanding of convivencia (living together, connecting). Here I highlight some examples of moments that led them to reflect and revise assumptions:

- Students’ discomfort with “El Negrito,” one card in the deck of a Mexican card game, which depicted a stereotyped caricature of a black person. The ensuing discussions about race, ethnicity, labeling, and “political correctness” (a totally new concept for the promotoras) endured for two semesters. Ironically, for African American students, it was just a card—a small detail in an otherwise wonderful relationship.

- A promotora’s description of the ethnic makeup of Ontario as having zones for mexicanos, negritos, chinos (Chinese), and los otros (anglos).

- A Korean American student’s distress at being referred to as china (which literally means Chinese but which is used to describe all Asians) and her perception that the host family members preferred to interact with the European American students.

- A student’s perception of one promotora as having Native American heritage, which she vehemently disputed.

- Students of Hispanic descent, who did not speak Spanish, attempting to adopt the promotora’s family in order to reconstruct their heritage and rise to a new level of bilingualism.

- Lesbian or gay students discussing their sexual preferences—a topic even more sensitive than race.

- A discussion about dating Asians or Asian Americans being more acceptable than African Americans.

- A promotora’s initial discomfort with a student who had multiple tattoos and body piercings, which was later reversed as he became more familiar, and she began to perceive him as a wonderful human being.

- A discussion about the correct labeling of a promotora’s daughter as either Chicana, Latina, or Hispana; to her, none were appropriate, she was just her daughter.

- Promotoras’ discussions about how they themselves are stereotyped, and how even their family and neighbors (but not they themselves) discriminate against people from other racial or ethnic backgrounds.

In sum, prior to this collaboration, the promotoras were not familiar with other ethnic groups and their initial curiosity was focused on European Americans. After they became familiar with students of diverse ethnic backgrounds, they learned to interact with each one as an individual personality, building trust slowly over time.

Understanding Mainstream Society

The promotoras also mention the concrete assistance and practical information related to the mainstream society they receive from the students, including such things as translating a section of an employee contract or an immigration office procedure, helping to pass a driving test, understanding a pregnancy test, buying and setting up a computer, or understanding labor laws. They also receive a variety of general information that piques their curiosity about the world around them, such as how to get into college, how to access health care, the nature of electricity, the history of Judaism, the difference between the Catholic Church and the Church of England, and why Henry VIII separated from the Catholic Church.

Yet, while they accept certain aspects of the mainstream culture, the promotoras often seek to reaffirm their own traditional cultural values and perspectives. For example, as a group, they have never understood why the students would want to attend college so far from their homes and families. They feel threatened by the idea that their own children would be tempted to do something similar. Although they want them to become better educated and get good jobs, they fear that that might lead to the severance of family ties. Thus, they appear ambivalent about the relative merits of maintaining cultural continuity through strong family bonds and cultural change through, in this case, educa-
tion. This conflict between continuity and change is an important and perennial topic for discussions among the students and promotoras.

**Building Personal Relationships**

The promotoras also enjoy moving into the students’ world for a short time and providing emotional support for them. One student invited her promotora to an aerobics class she was teaching because she wanted “to do something for her and bring her into my life a little bit, as she has brought me into hers.” Another student who invited a promotora to campus, said he wanted “to invite her to our field,” our space. Other students have invited their promotoras to see a play in which they are acting, visit the residence halls, attend their graduation, assist them in coping with the loss of a loved one, or to share a meal together at a restaurant or the student’s apartment. These interactions introduce the promotoras to social and cultural experiences that would otherwise be closed to them, and are a great source of pride and esteem (and to some degree envy) among their neighbors. One promotora explained:

Como que ellos (los estudiantes) sienten que uno los quiere...llegan y te dan un beso, no a cualquiera van a besar.

They feel that I love them...they (the students) arrive and kiss you; they are not going to kiss just anybody. (promotora #1, taped interview, 1/13/03)

Repeatedly, students have also invited visiting parents, siblings, and boyfriends to share time with the promotora in an effort to bring their disparate lives together. The promotoras would have never thought it possible to meet many of these visitors, who come from other states and often from affluent socioeconomic strata. Again one promotora said with pride:

Es porque me quieren conocer y les hablan a sus padres de mí.

It’s because they want to meet me, they speak about me to their parents. (promotora #1, 1/13/03)

**Agency**

Agency among the promotoras varies greatly, depending on their interests and personalities. Some want to effect major changes in their own lives and those of their neighbors. Others simply wish to be better mothers and wives. Some are just now beginning to understand their position at the intersection of two very different social networks and the potential benefits for themselves and their community. However, from early on, they have been actively involved in the ongoing process of the program’s curriculum development. Originally, we asked them, as “expert informants,” to assist in curriculum planning, only to find that they wanted us, the “experts,” to tell them what to do. In the beginning this asymmetrical relationship was to be expected. Later, however, in a great example of “resistance,” they simply stopped using a prescribed workbook, bringing in activities more in tune with their own household dynamics and family life. In time they felt empowered to change the whole curriculum, eschewing campus control and trying new methods. That was the turning point toward a more egalitarian relationship with the faculty and students.

In order to develop this new curriculum, the promotoras began to, quite naturally, employ what I perceived to be anthropological methods of inquiry—participant observation, interviewing, the ethics of information management, and basic ethnography. This helped them incorporate issues related to gender equality, birth control, immigration, health care, bilingualism in the school, and definitions of neighbors (vecinos), neighborhood (vecindario), and barrio. They realized that the curriculum was for them much as it was for the students because they were learning about many of the issues that the students brought from their classes. In essence, the promotoras recognized that they could exchange their learning generated by life experience(s) for the students’ academic knowledge, a fair trade from which both parties benefited. As a result, there was no paternalism on the students’ part, although we cannot disregard the asymmetrical power relationships that exist among constituencies of the program, and the continual effort required to bring people into relationships of equality.

Beyond their participation in this newly constituted collaborative curriculum development process, the promotoras took initiatives in a variety of settings. All of them began to study English. Some expressed their opinions on organizational issues related to the program. Others explored access to higher levels of education and to new economic opportunities.

One promotora, for example, has co-presented with faculty and students at three academic conferences (two of them out of state). She has made extraordinary progress in mastering English over the past two years and aspires to enroll in a junior college to become a teacher aide. She characterizes her relationship with the program as life changing. She has learned much about negotiating the English-speaking world, overcome her own prejudices toward non-Mexican groups, and acquired
the self-confidence and self-esteem to take on the challenges that generally prevent a woman in her socioeconomic position and at her age from continuing her education. She has also become a proponent of extending the benefits of this promotor network to the community of mothers at Sultana Elementary School. She hopes to address their need for information and eventually mobilize them as a force for community change.

Los muchachos influenciaron mucho aquí (su casa). Me gustaría que llegaran más a la comunidad entera, no sé de qué manera...para que personas se enteren también y que pidan información a los muchachos o que hablen con las promotoras y nos digan; ‘Oye, estos muchachos no sabrán esto, o aquello?’ Así.

The kids (students) have influenced a lot here (her house). I wish that they would go more into the whole community, I don’t know how...so that other people will also find out and ask information of the students or that they could talk with the promotoras and say to us, “Hey, those kids wouldn’t they know about this or that?” Like that. (promotora #5, taped interview, 1/15/03)

On the other hand, we have been waiting in vain for leadership from within the group of promotoras to emerge. If the program is to continue beyond the involvement of the current personalities, a regenerative form of indigenous leadership must develop. However, as yet, jealousies and conflicts have prevented any one promotora from taking on a leadership role. It may be that three years is not enough time to allow this process to complete itself.

Financial Effects

One fear we had at the beginning of the program was that the promotoras would be treated as commodities by the College; that they would be exploited. Since we wanted to keep the focus on the relationships that were being developed, the payment of stipends to the promotoras as “compensation” for their time was to be a secondary aspect. However, what has occurred over the three years is that some of the promotoras have begun to perceive the students as commodities. If they could have more students then they could have more visits, work more frequently, and make more money. In fact, one wanted to quit the program because it was adversely affecting her family’s tax situation. This attitude may impact the kinds of relationships they develop with the students and is cause for concern.

Nevertheless, while initially unexpected and modest, and in some ways problematic, the stipend offered to the promotoras has generated important and welcome benefits. With it, they have been able to achieve some measure of independence in shopping, to help relatives, or to provide assistance at home during difficult economic times. Helping the family financially contributes to their sense of self worth and validates the work of the program throughout the community.

Lessons Learned

Because of the experimental and collaborative nature of this program, all of the partners have gained experience and understanding. After three years, we seem to be approaching a new operational level and developing new forms of interaction which I review in the following sections. Here, I would like to briefly itemize some of the lessons learned, some advantages and disadvantages of unmediated community partnership, and some comments about potential replication elsewhere. Each of these topics could be expanded greatly, but that would go far beyond the scope of this article.

1. Since we were interested in developing a successful community-engaged language learning environment, we realized that the program structure and pedagogical design required that personal relationships and connectivity be central elements.

2. After that, we came to understand that Pitzer College would have to commit itself to a long-term relationship with a particular community. That meant quite a few years, not just several semesters. This paper reflects the experience over three years and, since the program is still evolving, we expect new understandings to develop over the next three years and beyond.

3. Consequently, all the participants and the outcomes continue to change and evolve, sometimes in unexpected ways.

4. A program structure unmediated by community service organization bureaucracies allowed for the development of stronger and more fluid relationships which, in turn, abetted this process of change and evolution.

5. This is not to suggest that an unmediated model is the right one. What is important is that a program model be developed that fits the sociocultural specificity of the context.

6. Understanding the context requires extensive fieldwork and cogent applied research by the faculty.

7. In fact, in such an unmediated program the faculty is central, requiring a high degree of
time and emotional investment.

8. This dependence on the individual faculty’s central role has potential negative consequences if s/he is no longer involved. Also, there may be difficulty in attracting external funding because agencies are concerned about the program’s sustainability.

9. The faculty’s close attention to individual participants requires a modest program scale.

10. The small scale and the direct relationship among students and community partners created the possibility for students to develop and transmit a culture of ethical engagement.

11. An essential element of this culture included a safe space for exploring the boundaries of race, class, and privilege.

12. Paradoxically, this space appears unstructured to those unfamiliar with the underlying organization, but it actually has a complex and subtle structure and pedagogical design.

Information Resource Networks

Recently, some of the promotoras’ immediate neighbors have come to regard the promotoras’ homes as informal information resource centers. The promotoras’ very personalized and flexible approach to the transmission of knowledge does not compete with established educational and social welfare institutions, but seeks to complement them by providing a level of specificity and cultural congruence that is often missing. For example, the school circulated information about the importance of healthy eating habits (obesity among Hispanic children is widespread), but did not give details about developing healthy menus for children. To do this requires knowledge about culturally specific cooking habits, the availability of certain foods and their costs, and appropriate recipes. In response, the promotoras, together with the program’s students and faculty, have begun exploring and researching ways to provide this information and to share it with neighbors.

Building on this model, different teams composed of students and promotoras are addressing various important neighborhood issues, such as health care, college and technical education, ESL classes, computer use, small business formation, drugs, sex education, and immigration. On the general topic of health, research has been focused on healthy eating and cooking habits, weight control, and affordable sports and exercise programs. Information about education has addressed college preparatory tracks in high school, vocational training, and adult classes. Computer issues include loans for purchase, formatting for Spanish, and Internet connections. Over two semesters, these teams are identifying information and resources, researching issues, and developing effective methods for transmitting their findings to the neighbors who need or want them.

Implications

This trend of the promotoras’ homes beginning to become hubs for diffusing information has implications for academic service-learning ventures in general. When we started this project three years ago, we intuitively sensed that it was more than a simple community-based language-learning program. However, we did not fully anticipate the extent to which the original pedagogical intent could be connected to a wide range of community development processes. While students continue to learn Spanish and promotoras continue to “promote” their language and culture in their homes, the expansion of the nature and scope of their interactions through the neighborhood raises new questions about the intersection of formal education, service, and social change.

Networking seems crucial to understand this phenomenon and certainly worthy of more study. In this case, we have the interplay of two very diverse networks—the students and the promotoras. The promotoras are very skillful at negotiating the complexities of their extended family and neighborhood networks in which they share most, if not all, cultural knowledge. Their kinship structure supports the system of compadrazgo (godparenthood), an important way to integrate non-kin with the extended family and consequently tie together these loosely arranged networks into a definable community (Alvarez, 1994). These culturally compatible social practices are noninstitutional, informal, personalized, horizontal, concrete, and direct. On the other hand, the promotoras are usually reserved and constrained by language and culture when facing institutional networks within the dominant society. Such networks are typically formal, impersonal, vertical, abstract, and mediated—but they are networks with which most Pitzer students are familiar and comfortable.

How is it that the people in these two very distinct social networks are able to come into meaningful contact? Certainly, the task of teaching and learning a foreign language provides the ostensible purpose for the relationship. Strong emotional ties between individuals have often resulted from the close partnerships developed in this work. However, moving beyond the individual to the social level, we find that people on the very margins of these social networks are communicating in extraordinary ways. For
example, a Pitzer student’s mother, living in another state, was able to provide specialized information for a school project for the daughter of the student’s promotoras. There is literature to suggest, perhaps counterintuitively, that it may be precisely the interaction of these kinds of culturally and socioeconomically incongruent networks that are most productive in the extensive and substantial diffusion of knowledge (Granovetter, 1973).

In *The Strength of Weak Ties*, Granovetter (1973) proposes the hypothesis that in small scale interactions the strength of personal ties in social networks can determine such phenomena as diffusion of knowledge, social mobility, political organization, and social cohesion. For example, strong ties among individuals are less likely to produce diffusion because of their very commonalities—information simply turns back on itself and remains within the clique. On the other hand, weak ties which are not hampered by such extensive overlap in their contacts, are more likely to produce diffusion, especially over “bridges” which might function as the only path between two points in different networks, or as the shortest local path within the same network. Those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we have.

[Indirect contacts are] of importance not only in ego’s manipulation of networks, but also in that they are channels through which ideas, influences, or information socially distant from ego may reach him. The fewer indirect contacts one has the more encapsulated he will be in terms of the world beyond his own friendship circle; thus, bridging weak ties (and consequent indirect contacts) are important in both ways. (pp. 1370-71)

Granovetter points out that bridges between two very different networks are more likely to occur over weak ties such as the promotoras/student relationship.

Intuitively speaking, this means that whatever is to be diffused can reach a larger number of people, and traverse greater social distance (i.e., path length), when passed through weak ties rather than strong. (p. 1366)

In other words, we may be observing one of the more efficient systems for diffusion—a program which sits at the interstice between two seemingly incompatible social networks and which exists primarily for the exchange of knowledge (in the beginning, teaching and learning Spanish) between them—and this may account for the ease with which promotoras’ homes seem to be developing into informal hubs of broader information transfer.

We started this project with the deceptively simple concept that language is a social practice, and our experience has brought us to another deceptively simple concept—that social connections have (economic) value, that social relations give access to resources embedded within them. For the promotoras, their passive initiation into a mysterious off-campus language-learning program three years ago has developed into an active and creative role in developing a true language-learning community having implications for social change and development within their neighborhood. A reciprocal and collaborative pedagogical enterprise between very distinct, weakly linked social networks has yielded concrete benefits for all participants.

**References**


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