

Promoting African Languages and Culture through Service Learning in the USA

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ABSTRACT

This study shows the relevance and prominence of Swahili language and culture in America. It underscores the nature, presence and relevance of African languages in America. Through Service learning approach, Swahili students, guided by their teachers offered Swahili language and culture lessons to the elderly in one of the counties in Georgia for 6 weeks. Data seem to suggest that the elderly were surprised at the presence of Swahili in their first language and its prominence in American social media; they appreciated various aspects of African culture, namely- Africans' respect of the elderly, greeting one another, and the versatile nature of African clothes. The elderly showed great interest in learning more about Swahili language and culture. The author calls on other Africanists to find ways to educate the American public about African languages and culture. Teaching implications include the need for teachers to be intentional and strategic about finding ways to use language and culture courses as panacea for promoting minority languages and cultures around the world.

Key words: Service Learning; African languages, culture, Swahili.

INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes increasingly integrated, major languages such as French and Spanish continue to be preferred and thus offered in most American higher learning institutions because of their relevance locally and internationally. Likewise, American citizens are progressively learning the afore-mentioned languages and cultures. African languages and cultures find themselves competing to be relevant and of value in the American public. Thus, this study sought to educate the American public about the relevance and prominence of Swahili language and culture in America through a service learning approach.

Service Learning (SL), also known as Community Engagement (CE) has several definitions but all center on the idea of students applying academic skills and knowledge to deal with a problem, an issue or a need in a specific community while enhancing their learning. The National Service Learning Clearinghouse defines it as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.” While community service allows people to offer any needed service in communities, service learning connects what students are learning to address genuine needs in their nearby community (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). In this article, I use Bringle and Hatcher's (1995) definition of academic service-learning as “a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (p. 112). As students gain knowledge in various areas and apply it in real

situations, they gain real-life skills to solve problems while developing leadership skills in addition to becoming committed to civic participation (Furco & Root, 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service learning (SL) is built on the idea that learning occurs best when students are actively involved in their own learning and when the learning has a distinct purpose (Billig, 2000). Thus, many studies across various disciplines and contexts attest to higher academic achievement through SL (Clayton, Bringle, & Hatcher, 2013; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). For instance, Warren (2012)' meta-analysis of 11 research studies found student learning outcomes were significantly impacted in many areas with an overall effect size of $d = .332$. In their research study, Jameson, Clayton, and Ash (2013) found that service learning resulted in students' having higher order thinking skills, application of knowledge, and critical thinking. Also, the Association of American Colleges and Universities tout service-learning as one of the "high-impact educational practices" consistently producing positive student learning outcomes (Eyler, Giles & Braxton, 1997, Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Kuh, 2008). Lockeman and Pelco (2013) also note a higher level of degree completion for students engaged in service learning than their peers who didn't have a similar coursework. Additionally, students see a greater connection to the coursework, gain a sense of community with their classmates while also building a different way of relating with their teachers (Brownell & Swaner, 2010). Even more, SL "builds their self-confidence and develops a sense of empowering" (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Wulsin, 2008).

Other studies also attest to the experiential benefit of service-learning that often result in employment. For example, Duncan and Taylor (2013) note: In a world of inflated grades and the consequent academic excellence of so many graduates, graduate schools and businesses are beginning to examine other qualifications of their applicants. Many rate "service" to the community high on the list of what separates the average applicant from the superior one not only [due] to the commitment it requires but also the skills it can produce that are frequently not acquired in a classroom (p. 3).

Along with academic learning outcomes, much research has established positive effects of SL including enhanced moral reasoning and personal identity development (Clayton, Bringle, & Hatcher, 2013; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Other benefits include greater sense of personal identity, interpersonal development, particularly the capability to work well with others and develop leadership and communication skills. Service learning also results in students gaining greater inter-cultural understanding that enhance their perceptions and relationships with people around the world (Clayton, Bringle, & Hatcher, 2013).

Some studies show benefits of service learning to communities. Balciene and Mazeiklene indicate that community enjoyed the help received, appreciated cooperation with those involved in offering service and were grateful for the emotional support (2008). Sherraden and researchers listed intercultural competence, international knowledge, tangible resources, capacity building, tolerance, and global engagement as host community outcomes (2013). However, a gap still exists in literature regarding the benefits of Service-Learning for community members (Harrington, 2014).

This study sought to underscore ways in which Swahili students worked with their teachers as agents of change in their school community to bring awareness of the meaning, value, relevance and presence of Swahili in America. This article shows the impact of students' service to the elderly- the participants in this study.

METHOD

Participants and Context

The study took place at one University community located in the Northeastern part of the United States of America. The community has people from various parts of the USA but also hosts people from many parts of the world because it is known to be a great place for retirement. This project involved 12 participants, 3 male and 9 females from the Community Center on Aging (CCA) whose ages ranged from 53 years old to 78 years of age. All of them were literate but with various levels of education- some graduated from high school only while some had a four-year college degree. About four of them had a master's degree while two retired from professions that required a terminal degree. Seven of them had extended families living within the community and six of them had at least two grandchildren. Two participants had health challenges that limited their mobility while the rest were active and able to engage in simple activities requiring body movement.

Five university students also participated- one male and the rest were females who worked with one Swahili instructor and one teaching assistant. The students were in their fourth level of Swahili class having completed three previous Swahili courses. The five students also had flexible schedules that allowed them to participate fully in the program while the rest of the students enrolled in the same course did other projects agreeable with their class schedule. All students were eager and excited to be a part of the program.

Procedure

Like other educational approaches and strategies, Service-learning aligns curriculum with specific educational goals and objectives. According to Shelley Billig (2011), SL has six elements that guide and facilitate students' learning leading to positive outcomes. Such elements reflect an action plan that starts with investigation, planning, action, reflection, demonstration and ends with celebration. This project implemented all six elements as steps toward enhancing students' Swahili language and culture skills while allowing them to be agents of change in educating their fellow Americans the Swahili language and culture.

Investigation means exploring and examining the need, context and participants. For this project, this first step involved the Swahili instructor reaching out to various populations within university community to identify possible participants for the program. Upon various correspondence with elementary schools, middle schools, high schools and centers for the aging, it became apparent that the first group would be the elderly. Thus, the instructor proceeded to communicate with the center for the aging to find out whether most of the elderly at that center knew anything about Swahili and if not, whether they would be interested in learning about it. Preliminary correspondence targeted the director of the center through emails and phone calls. Upon a positive response to the need for the project, visitation to the center and learning the proper procedures, rules, suitable times and possible setting were established. Also, students were asked to research at least three community centers for the elderly, visit each of them in groups and prepare a brief report on one they would be interested in visiting further. As in most SL programs, this stage gave students the opportunity to do research, create surveys about their target community's knowledge about Swahili, analyze data, and observe behaviors to find an issue that they can address in bringing global cultural awareness in their university community. This stage also allowed them to take on leadership roles within the classroom while advancing their communication and team-building skills.

Planning was the second stage taken to identify roles that the instructor would need to play regarding advertising the program and obtaining permission both from the Universtiy

institution as well as the center for the aging. This stage also identified location for classes, time and frequency of the meetings. Such information was included in various advertisements including flyers, Facebook postings, emails and twitter accounts associated with the center. A preliminary visit to the center was made by the instructor and students to establish setting, use of media, group assignments and present an overview of the program. This visit was also another way to advertise the program and allow questions, wonderings and other issues that may have been overlooked.

Once participants registered, the instructor and students made transportation arrangements, agreed on topics for each session and assigned roles during each of the visits. Topics were identified based on observations and findings during the investigation stage. The Swahili students also had to undergo a special training regarding ways to interact with the elderly, possible issues to consider- such as making sure they speak loud and clear because most of the elderly have hearing challenges. Each of the students had to pass a background check. A survey of participants' knowledge of the Swahili language and culture (table 1) was prepared and taken to the center prior to the first instructional session.

Table 1: CCA Participants' knowledge-survey before participation in the program

Questions and common responses	
1.	Do you know anything about Swahili? <i>It's a click language, I think it's hard, not sure really, I don't know, never heard of it</i>
-	Do you know where Swahili is spoken? List countries or part of continent. <i>Somewhere in Africa, Ethiopia maybe. I think South Africa. Congo, maybe Ghana and Nigeria.</i>
-	Its prominence in the USA - <i>Nothing that I know really, nope</i>
-	Its significance in the United Nations? - <i>I think Spanish and French is in the UN but I never hear of Swahili being there, well I don't know.</i>
2.	What Swahili cultural aspects do you know? (i.e, clothing, common food, respect/value for the elderly, inter-dependence, popular songs etc- list anything you know).
i.	<i>I heard somebody said a song was sang in Swahili during the FIFA World Cup in South Africa, Mufasa? No, not much really, I know they are really happy and nice people- that's what many Africans are, that's it really.</i>
3.	Why did you enroll in the class? <i>Sounds interesting. To learn something different. I like learning new things. I never learned other languages you know, I just want to hear something different. I like to learn just about anything. I was intrigued about it in the promo session</i>

The surveys were given and recorded accordingly. The next step was action. This stage signaled the onset of the program whereby language and culture sessions began. This is when students became mediators of change in their community. They were given the power and opportunity to make a difference and see a practical connection between what they are learning and the real-world. Working with their teacher, students designed four 20minute-sessions that they offered once a week for four weeks. The first session focused on introduction to Swahili: giving relevance of Swahili in America. The session underscored some Swahili words found in English, such as Simba, Rafiki, mama etc. Other connections to the American culture included fashion- the use Vitenge/Kanga/Vikoi fabrics worn by several American celebrities as well as food items such as Chai found in many grocery stores and Starbucks coffee shops.

The second session was twofold: it covered historical/political/geographical information about the Swahili such as where Swahili is spoken. The session also taught participants greetings in Swahili. Participants learned not only how to greet each other in simple Swahili but also learned the role of greetings within the Swahili culture, with special emphasis to "Shikamoo" "Marahaba" as a special greeting with various historical backgrounds but one that the Swahili

use to show respect to the elderly. In the third session, participants learned to introduce themselves and a few common phrases such as how to say thank you, goodbye and please. Session four covered the Swahili names for the big five animals and numbers 1-10. There was a separate session dedicated to Swahili fashion whereby Swahili students did a fashion show to demonstrate ways in which Kanga and Vitenge are used in Swahili-speaking countries and how they can be used in the US. Some Chai and Maandazi were also brought to give participants a taste of Swahili food. This was also the session whereby participants were given another survey of their Swahili knowledge after participating in the program (table 2).

Table 2: CCA knowledge-survey after participation in the program

1. What do you know about Swahili?
2. Do you know where Swahili is spoken? List countries or part of continent.
 - Its prominence in the USA
 - Its significance in the United Nations?
3. What Swahili cultural aspects do you know? (i.e, clothing, common food, respect/value for the elderly, inter-dependence, popular songs etc- list anything you know).
4. Did you like this program? If so, what did you enjoy the most?
5. Would you like to participate in this program if offered again in the future? If yes, what issues, topics would you request?
6. Would you recommend this program to your friends?

Reflection was the next implementation element. Students from the university, the elderly from CCA and instructors reflected on the program. This paper focuses on reflections made by participants from the CCA center based on their answers to questions 1 through 6 of the post-program survey (table 2). Although students who taught the CCA participants also reflected on the program, their reflections are shared in another article. I use the CCA participants' reflections to illustrate ways in which this project developed a sense of global awareness that became clear after their participation in the project. By analyzing aspects that the CCA participants found to be "more enjoyable" and examining reasons behind such choices, I was able to underscore key findings in this study. Also, by looking at specific facts that the CCA participants were able to recall at the end of the program, I could see the consequences of taking actions to educate the American public about minority languages and culture.

The last two elements of service-learning involved demonstration and celebration. Students from the university demonstrated their learning by analyzing the implication behind responses given by the CCA participants to the post-program survey questions. Students presented their findings in front of their Swahili class. One group decided to make a follow-up action plan based on responses for question 5 in the post-program survey. Celebration was the final step. Students and teachers arranged to meet the CCA participants briefly. This celebration session culminated with the giving of Kanga fabrics to each participant as their certificate of participation. The celebration session reconnected students to the community and a group photo was also taken but not included in this paper to preserve CCA participants' privacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data seems to suggest that there was a positive impact of the program to most participants. The impact is examined based on responses given in the post-program survey (table 2).

Table 3: Impact of Program

Qtn #	# responses	Common Responses
1	11	It's a language, culture, good, it is fun, has Simba in it, Rafiki, safari, mama, chai, Tanzania, shikamoo, ndiyo, asantee, kwaheeri, jambo bwana, mimi Asha, kanga, sounds a lot like English, no funny letters:) Can't believe there is so much Swahili in English, the US Navy sang a Swahili song, movies and some American shows use Swahili words
2	10	Kenya, Tanzana, Uganda, East Africa, Africa, UN uses Swahili, Tanzania, where you are from, in the Serengeti country, Maasai
3	12	Shikamoo, I say marahaba- a good thing, they respect us elders, mandazi, simama/kaa song, jambo bwana, Vitenge, you can use Kanga to carry a baby
4	12	Yes- 12; I liked the simama/kaa song, shikamoo, fashion show, photos of East Africa and the animals, I liked singing, counting, greetings, respect for us, loved to talk to the students- they were so sweet like my grandchildren
5	10	Yes, anything is fine. I like to learn more about spices; cultural aspects, I need to practice greetings, I want to learn more, can we go there? I like your shoes- are those Swahili too? More songs, I want African dance. I really liked the Kangas and I want to order some. I wish we learned more about African clothing and other cultural aspects like how to cook certain foods
6	12	Absolutely, yes of course, yes. Yes indeed. This is so unique; I will tell my friends. I feel so good to know this, yes, I will tell them.

By analyzing the data, three findings emerged. First, participants were surprised about Swahili's presence in their language and culture. Second, they appreciated various aspects of the Swahili culture. Third, they showed interest towards a minority culture.

Participants were surprised about Swahili's presence in their language and culture

Data seems to suggest that participants were surprised at the presence of Swahili in their language and culture: particularly social media and food. More specifically, when asked, "Do you know anything about Swahili? prior to taking Swahili language and culture (SLC) lessons, participants responded as followed: It's a click language, I think it's hard, not sure really, I don't know, never heard of it (see table 1). In fact, five out of twelve said "never really heard of it" while three of them said "not sure really". One thought it is a click language while two of them just thought it was hard. Clearly, they hardly knew anything about Swahili. After participating in the program, eleven participants out of twelve gave very specific answers to that question. Their answers were a recollection of the words and things they learned. Each participant listed at least one word they knew.

After collecting the surveys, the Swahili teacher held a brief meeting with participants to give them an opportunity to add anything to their written responses. This was done intentionally because some of them couldn't write fast and had trouble seeing clearly. In that meeting, all participants commented on the fact that they knew some of the words they wrote in their survey responses prior to taking the SLC lessons but were not aware that those words were in Swahili. Taking SLC lessons helped them connect the presence of the Swahili language to English- a language they already spoke. For example, almost everyone said that they couldn't believe that "Simba and rafiki" are Swahili words as well as "hakuna matata." Many of them started identifying Swahili words in popular songs such as "Malaika" which means angel while

others couldn't believe that Swahili has become so significant in America that the US Navy sang a song called "baba yetu" in Swahili which means "our father" (see table 3).

One participant recalled her astonishment when she found that Starbucks sells Chai and they sell some coffee labeled "katikati"- a Swahili word which means "in the middle," used with Starbucks to denote "medium" coffee. Also, two participants who like to drink tea said that they have been buying chai tea from Walmart, Kroger, and Bells outlet stores in their city. In fact, one of them said that he couldn't believe that there are several Swahili food items right here in America. He said that he bought a box of chai tea bags from Bells outlet made from Kilimanjaro Tanzania. He didn't know what "Kilimanjaro" was but the SLC lessons helped him see that Swahili has been a part of his life all along. These statements are a testament that the participants in this study may be a good representation of other elderly in American with limited knowledge of the presence of Swahili in America. The study shows that it takes very little effort to open people's eyes and enlighten their minds of an African language and culture that is and has been a part of them for a long time.

Participants appreciated various aspects of the Swahili culture.

When asked, "What Swahili cultural aspects do you know? (i.e, clothing, common food, respect/value for the elderly, inter-dependence, popular songs etc- list anything you know- see table 1 question 3), prior to the SLC lessons, they provided the following responses:

I heard somebody said a song was sang in Swahili during the FIFA World Cup in South Africa, Mufasa?

No, not much really,

I know they are very happy and nice people- that's what many Africans are, that's it really

Their responses indicate a shallow knowledge of the Swahili culture. Notice, they only mentioned broad ideas of the language although the question wasn't addressing the Swahili language at all. One person seemed to recall a Swahili song. That individual couldn't specify the name of the song itself, but he seemed to remember that he heard the song when the FIFA World Cup was hosted in South Africa. Another participant simply remembered a character in the Lion king movie - Mufasa. About seven participants didn't know anything about Swahili culture. One person wrote that the Swahili people are really happy and nice people because to her, that is what many Africans seem to be. All their responses didn't address the heart of the question- meaning, no one knew anything specific about the Swahili culture.

After attending the SLC program, their answers to the same question were completely different (see table 3). They expressed very specific ideas of the Swahili culture. Their answers seem to suggest three common themes: Africans' respect of the elderly, greeting one another and the versatile nature of African clothes. First, they appreciated the Swahili's sense of respect to elders. This was well reflected in their mention of the special greeting used to show respect for elders: namely- Shikamoo -Marahaba. Four people wrote that greeting by stating: "Shikamoo, I say marahaba- a good thing." Instead of just writing the greeting itself, they tagged it with an explanation about it, "a good thing." Additionally, three people specifically noted their admiration of the fact that the Swahili seem to respect elders. Their response helps us get a sense of the emotions toward the Swahili culture. They included themselves as recipients of the Swahili cultural values by observing that the Swahili "respect *us* elders." As stated previously, their written responses were also elaborated during the follow-up meeting. In addition to mentioning Swahili food such as maandazi and chai, about three of them said that they were happy to know that the Swahili seem to be interdependent because they seek to greet each other.

Second, they listed the common greeting “jambo” but attached “bwana” with it. When asked why they didn’t just write the greeting word “jambo” by itself, they each felt that “bwana” to them communicated a sense of connection that is not captured by the English word “sir”. Third, all female participants listed the Swahili’s clothing items namely, Vitenge and Kanga. During discussion time, they each spoke so fondly of the idea of using a piece of cloth to send a message because each “Kanga”- a piece of cloth, has a written message. The Swahili use the Kangas like Americans use greeting cards for various occasions. In addition, the Swahili use “Vitenge”- larger piece of African fabric to carry babies on their back. Some women use such pieces of cloth as aprons, table cloths or wraps to keep themselves warm. Participants admired such clothing and wished they had something like that in America.

Participants showed interest towards a minority culture

The elderly showed great interest in learning more about the Swahili culture. They expressed this through the responses to the following questions: Did you like this program? If so, what did you enjoy the most? Would you like to participate in this program if offered again in the future? If yes, what issues, topics would you request? Would you recommend this program to your friends? All twelve participants liked the program. The following statements represent common responses: “I liked the simama/kaa song, shikamoo, fashion show, photos of East Africa and the animals, I liked singing, counting, greetings, respect for us, loved to talk to the students- they were so sweet like my grandchildren. Ten out of the twelve participants said they would like to participate in the program if offered again. They listed the following as topics of choice for future offerings:

Yes, anything is fine. I like to learn more about spices; cultural aspects, I need to practice greetings, I want to learn more, can we go there? I like your shoes- are those Swahili too? More songs, I want African dance. I really liked the Kangas and I want to order some. I wish we learned more about African clothing and other cultural aspects like how to cook certain foods

Their responses indicated a great interest to learn more about specific aspects of the Swahili culture. For example, one person expressed an interest to visit the Swahili coast, she said “can we go there? Others loved the songs and another one wanted to learn African dance. Five people expressed their desire to learn more about African clothing and food. Lastly, all of them mentioned their will to recommend the program to their friends. They wrote: “Absolutely, yes of course, yes. Yes indeed. This is so unique; I will tell my friends. I feel so good to know this, yes, I will tell them”. The specific requests are a testament of a thirst to learn more about a minority culture. Though some wanted to visit the Swahili Coast, many showed a clear desire to learn more about the Swahili culture while living in America.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Sometimes it is easy to look at the world and wonder why things are the way they are. Many times, it is easy to believe that things just happen arbitrarily. When it comes to awakening the minds of people to know about other cultures that exist and worth studying, it is upon each one of us to do something about it. Those of us who teach African languages, literatures and culture have a responsibility to share our knowledge with other communities in which we reside. We need to be intentional about using our language and culture courses as panacea for promoting our languages and cultures around the world. Change doesn’t happen overnight; it takes time. It may take a long time before many people in the United States of America know Swahili language and culture but educating one community at a time plants a seed that will spread and grow.

CONCLUSION

The rainbow is only beautiful because of its various colors. The world today begs for more colors of cultures to make it more beautiful. We see dominant cultures continuing to shape

ways in which people see the world without realizing that minority cultures still have a role to play. No language or culture is too minor and insignificant. Each language and culture brings something different and unique and deserves a place in the world. This study illustrates the hunger and thirst for one community to learn about another culture. This study shows that people long to relate to each other and wish to learn about varied ways of living. It underscores the need to examine how much we know about other people in the world because we end up discovering that we know something about a people that seemed so foreign to us. We discover that there is nothing to lose by learning about other people. This study is a step towards a programmatic approach to making the world a more peaceful and just society by seeking to make which seems so unfamiliar become familiar. And by doing so, as global citizens, we see ways in which each of us can add colors in the cultural rainbow. We can bring beauty in the world that more often shows darkness than light.

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