Integrating service-learning in international student education

By: Ekaterina Arshavskaya, PhD, Intensive English Associate Professor

Recently, service-learning projects have been becoming an important trend in higher education. These projects encompass activities that allow students to apply the concepts and skills they learn in college to real-life situations that benefit local communities. For example, students studying a foreign language can volunteer in the local community as an interpreter, and art students can volunteer at summer art camps.

Incorporating service-learning can be a very rewarding experience, while it also may represent some challenges for those involved in the projects. Faculty members and students need to establish trusting relationships with local communities and organizations to develop projects that can benefit all the participants. Despite the challenges, some well-known educators have pronounced service-learning “a key element” in language education in the 21st century.

This spring, I incorporated some service-learning projects into my speaking and listening courses within the Intensive English Language Institute at Utah State University. The students first visited the English Language Center in Logan, Utah and helped the center promote their services via social media. They also designed and conducted several learning activities at the USU pre-school. By creating their own activities, the students were able to share parts of their own cultures through games and music.

“The life skill I learned is being more patient to kids,” said Yu Miao, a USU Economics and Business major involved with the program. “They are angels with a halo from God. Helping others creates a peaceful environment, and innovation leads people to become more unique and attractive just like a little boy in pre-school.”

With the addition of these projects, students were able to improve their communication skills in English and learn about the local community. The projects served as bonding experiences as well, helping students and myself to get to know one another better, resulting in a more comfortable learning environment for everyone.

“What are urgent needs of this community? It could be a lot of things, but the most important is love. I think we need to show love to people every day and this is my reflection,” said another student participant who wished to remain anonymous.

While the current situation with the pandemic may complicate our efforts at fostering community–university relationships, virtual environments may offer to us new and exciting ways to integrate service-learning in college students’ experiences. As an educator, I believe in the importance of meaningful and transformative educational experiences. It seems to me that service-learning is an important means to provide our students with those experiences in education.