

Birchwood FLEX: Building Community through Multilingual Language Exchange

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Background:

I came into the 2016-17 Community Engagement Fellows program with experience incorporating service learning in the intermediate Spanish classes I teach at Western. Last fall, however, I didn't have a specific project plan, other than a desire to learn from my colleagues about the types of projects they'd carried out in their classes. Initially, I'd hoped to use my project to find ways to connect with other people using Spanish in the Bellingham community. As we moved through the year, I realized that while those conversations were valuable, that the topic felt too nebulous to organize a project around.

Instead, I focused on a project that had already been in the works, a family language exchange program at Birchwood Elementary. The conversations throughout the year with my cohort helped me to refine the project and will shape the post-project reflections and refinements that I hope to make for future versions of the events.

Project Overview:

During the Winter 2017 academic quarter at Western, a group of parents and teachers from Birchwood Elementary School collaborated with Western students taking Spanish 425 to design and implement a family language exchange program (FLEX).

The project came about through a conversation with a parent who had been involved with a similar program a few years ago. Basically, the program provides a way for families to come together and practice language skills—primarily English and Spanish—and get to know one another in a relaxed setting.

The Birchwood team applied for and received a Project Neighborly grant through the Whatcom Family and Community Foundation, which we used to provide food and entrance fees for the various field trips we took as a group. The Western students, with my help, developed bilingual (Spanish-English) activities and helped to facilitate the events.

The FLEX group met on Monday evenings from 5:15-6:45 and averaged between 80-120 people in attendance at each event. We alternated between events at the school and field trips, such as bowling and Trampoline Zone. Whenever possible, we tried to support neighborhood businesses (such as Park Bowl and Neto's).

Birchwood Elementary has a high percentage of Spanish-speaking families and teachers had commented on the reluctance of parents to engage with English-

speaking school staff. After the FLEX events, the parents in attendance were more likely to know and engage with their fellow parents.

The students in Spanish 425 received two academic credits; this course is one that MCL typically uses for such things as working in the tutoring center or working in local high school classrooms. We ran this project through that course number for expediency.

Future directions and lingering questions:

Because the FLEX events took place during the Winter 2017 quarter, the hands-on portion of the project was wrapped up during the course of the fellows cohort meetings. The greatest benefit from my cohort came during the debriefing phase of the project, during which they were able to help me brainstorm future funding opportunities and partnerships, as well as offer insights on big-picture themes such as how to measure success and communicate effectively about the nature and outcomes of the project.

Going forward, I hope to accomplish the following goals related to the FLEX program:

- Pull together resources and a curriculum so that another school or district can build on our work and create their own language-based community program. Share these resources in an accessible way, perhaps via PDF, a website, or a how-to manual.
- Research interest in repeating the program in future years, either at Birchwood or other area schools.
- Create an “internship” or “community engagement” class that could be a model for similar, future projects within MCL, either in Spanish or other language sections.
- Explore models for effective community-campus collaborations within the language classroom.
- Facilitate ongoing relationships between students of Spanish at Western and Spanish speakers and community partners in the Bellingham community.
- Secure funding for future iterations of the project.
- Measure the impact of future iterations of this program: Are parents more likely to be involved with school events? Do these events affect learning outcomes for the students involved (elementary and university)? Share these insights in relevant ways so that others may build on what we’ve done.