

CAUCE Research Award 2009/10: Closing Report (August 2011)

Project Title: Building Transformative Learning Communities: A Formative Evaluation of the UBC ESL Conversation Facilitators Program

Conducted by: UBC's Centre for Intercultural Language Studies (CILS)

Website: <http://cils.educ.ubc.ca/>

CILS & Research Committee

The Centre for Intercultural Language Studies (CILS) at the University of British Columbia was established in 1994 as an interfaculty centre for research, outreach, and collaboration on issues broadly connected to language, culture, and education. CILS is sponsored and supported by three major UBC bodies: the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Education, and Continuing Studies. Over the past seventeen years, CILS has provided service to the language teaching and learning community not only at the University of British Columbia, but also in the broader professional field and amongst sister postsecondary institutions in British Columbia.

The CILS Research Committee was made up of five members from the CILS Advisory Committee and a key collaborator from the UBC Learning Exchange. Committee members met regularly between June 2009 and June 2011 to oversee the planning of the research project, data collection, coding, analysis, and reporting of findings. Members of the CILS Research Committee were:

Monique Bournot-Trites, Language and Literacy Education Department, UBC

Ken Reeder, Language and Literacy Education Department, UBC

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UBC's Learning Exchange ESL Conversation Facilitator Program

The UBC Learning Exchange opened in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) in 2000 as a community-university engagement initiative. The DTES community is often described as Canada's poorest postal code where mental illness, crime, addictions, HIV/AIDS, prostitution, unemployment, and gentrification are a daily reality. Nevertheless, residents and patrons of the community describe it as being vibrant and rich in lived experiences, the arts, volunteerism, social justice efforts, multicultural diversity, support, and acceptance. Situated within the DTES, the UBC Learning Exchange initially had two broad and complimentary mandates: to provide a base for student volunteers, and to offer free courses and volunteer opportunities to members of the DTES community. The UBC Learning Exchange aimed to identify assets in the marginalized community it served and build capacity there, rather than focusing on problems and unintentionally creating dependence.

the later development of the ESL Conversation Program followed this asset-based model closely. In 2004, patrons of the Learning Exchange's 'Drop-In' (providing free access to computers and the internet) participated in a project that documented their strengths and interests, and the idea of volunteers from the community undertaking ESL outreach to adult immigrants was consequently raised. Training for the volunteers leading the conversation sessions consisted at first of simple orientation and discussion of the goals of ESL conversation classes, along with some modeling of technique.

A grant from the Vancouver Foundation enabled visits to these informal training circles by guest presenters to talk, for example, about immigrant experiences and language-learning. Arising from this a formal arrangement was made with UBC's English Language Institute (ELI) and a more structured training program was set up. The workshops were held on UBC's main campus and led by ESL teachers from the ELI.

The program won a CAUCE Program Award of Excellence in 2007.

In the period covered by the research, the training workshops had been relocated from UBC's main campus to the Learning Exchange, and were led by the Learning Exchange's ESL Program Coordinator rather than ELI instructors. Volunteers attended training workshops on Friday afternoons for three months, while also leading ESL conversation sessions at other points in the week. The ESL Conversation Program at the time of the research offered conversation sessions to around 900 learners over four terms a year, and trained around 50 new facilitators each year.

Background to Study

By 2008 the structure and content of the Learning Exchange's ESL Conversation Facilitator Program had reached a mature stage of development. Wishing to conduct a formal, research-based program evaluation and, with the approval of the Learning Exchange, UBC's Continuing Studies sought the assistance of the Centre for Intercultural Language Studies (CILS), whose mandate includes a strong research component and a focus on cross-cultural learning.

CILS reviewed the Program and established a Research Committee augmented by a key collaborator from the Learning Exchange. The Committee proposed broad and detailed research objectives, in addition to a research design and methodology. In February 2009, the research committee submitted two separate applications for CAUCE and UBC Continuing Studies' research funds. By June 2009, both applications had been accepted.

Overview of Study

The research was conducted within the theoretical framework of Appreciative Inquiry put forth by Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987). By taking an Appreciative Inquiry approach, the research committee sought to work with members of UBC's Learning Exchange ESL Conversation Program to identify what was working well, as opposed to what was not, in order to provide

support and direction for further positive growth. The committee also drew on ideas around Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and Asset-Based Community Development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; McKnight, 1995), upon which UBC's Learning Exchange ESL Conversation Program was initially developed. The concept of Asset-Based Community Development views meaningful community development (particularly within challenged communities) as occurring when members contribute their unique skills and talents to one another.

The research questions guiding the study were:

1. What are the strengths of the ESL facilitator training workshop?
2. How does the ESL facilitator training workshop work as a Community of Practice?

The study was conducted at the UBC Learning Exchange across two terms of training workshops, between September 2009 and June 2010.

Participants

The first group of participants consisted of four staff members (past and present) from the Learning Exchange's ESL Conversation Program, including two former trainers and the current trainer at the time of the study. The second group of participants consisted of thirteen volunteer facilitators in training (six during the first term and seven during the second). Six of the volunteer participants were women and seven were men and all were either residents of the DTES community or patrons of the community's various services and activities. Most were unemployed at the time of the study. Nine of the thirteen volunteer participants were not first language speakers of English but rather of Mandarin, Cantonese, Tagalog, French, Japanese, and Russian. The ages of the facilitator participants ranged from 30 to 60 with most of them being in their 50s. The researcher on site adopted the role of participant-researcher by attending and participating in the training workshops along with the volunteer facilitators each week.

Data Collection

Between September 2009 and April 2010, three data types were collected from the volunteer participants during the training workshops. First, there were focus group reflective discussions, one conducted at the mid-term and one at the end of term. Second, observations were made during each training session; notes on the interactions between participants, and the exchanges of learning taking place, were recorded in a journal. As well, notes were made on the kinds of assets participants were bringing to the table. Third, a questionnaire was completed by participants several weeks before the end-of-term focus group discussion. A semi-structured interview with four staff members, conducted in May and June of 2010, provided yet another layer of data. All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analyses.

Analysis of Data

Between December 2010 and May 2011, interview and focus group data were analyzed qualitatively following Miles and Huberman (1994), Bodgan and Biklen (1998), Merriam (1998) and Silverman (2000), using themes based on our research questions and theoretical conceptualization. Due to the small number of participants, questionnaires were analyzed in the

same way and used as complementary data. A coding manual, defining each theme precisely with examples from the data, was created. To ensure standardization, the CILS Research Committee of six coded the same excerpt of data individually and then compared their coding in a group meeting. This comparison and discussion resulted in some edits to the coding manual, thus making it more precise and increasing coding reliability. The unit of analysis decided upon was idea chunks in the data, and nine themes were retained for coding:

- Motivation to join and participate
- Training approach
- Teacher/facilitator construct
- Assets of facilitators
- Confidence and capacity-building
- Positive atmosphere
- Exchange of learning
- Transformation of self and learning
- Involvement of the university

The entire data set was divided among the research committee members who first coded their assigned data individually. An excel spreadsheet was created into which each coder entered key information including the excerpt from the data, its thematic code, and speaker. Committee members then worked in pairs to compare their coding and reach a consensus. The coding manual was referred to when needed, but no substantial coding discrepancies were found between the pairs. This qualitative analysis of the data resulted in the findings presented in the next section.

Research Findings

In response to the first research question (What are the strengths of the ESL facilitator training workshop?), the research committee identified four major strengths as described below in the following sections. With each finding, a few examples drawn from staff interviews, focus groups, and observation notes, to support the four findings are provided.

1) Training Approach

The first strength identified was the workshop's training approach. All three trainers participating in the study highlighted that their approach during the workshops was both organic and informal in the traditional sense. Laura, the program's first trainer who initiated the ESL Conversation Program at the Learning Exchange in 2004, reflected on her approach to the training workshops:

I wanted to see it happen organically and how it would be with different facilitators. An expression of who they are in this kind of leadership role ... It [her training approach] was really unstructured. I was really basing it on Paulo Freire's sort of Learning Circles ... My

approach was this really is your language class. And um, these discussion questions are just here to help guide you (Interview, June 2010).

Here, an ‘organic’ approach, as described by Laura, is understood as taking the lead from questions, comments, and experiences raised by the volunteer facilitators. By being open-minded, flexible, and comfortable with minimal pre-determined (or imposed) structure during the training workshops, the trainers aimed to create a space where the experiences and thoughts of the volunteers could be shared and discussed comfortably.

Another aspect contributing to the strength of the training approach was the emphasis placed on ‘facilitating’ instead of ‘teaching’ during the workshop. Mike, the current trainer at the time of the study, commented:

The workshops are all about demystifying this whole ESL thing. Sharing language is pretty human and natural. So we do that in the workshops ... Again, the problems come when volunteers are thinking of themselves in this kind of teacher space and then they’ve got all these stereotypes about what it is to be a teacher. If you forget that and just act naturally, then it works. (Interview, May 2010)

Over the course of the workshops, volunteers discussed the notion of not being ESL teachers but rather ESL conversation facilitators. When asked during the final focus group what they remembered as being important or useful during the training workshops, one of the volunteers, Peter, replied:

Well, one thing I remember, Mike said we’re not here to teach people stuff. (Focus Group, April 2010)

These discussions can be traced back to the first training workshop where Mike took the time to emphasize this particular point to the volunteers. In the second term, the volunteer participants often used the terminology of ‘host’ (providing hospitality for a group) versus ‘a star’ (solo performance), an analogy introduced by Mike on the first day of the workshop. Many volunteers shared that they were quite nervous when they first began attending the training workshops, but once they realized that they were not expected to ‘teach’ the learners, it helped them to relax.

2) Confidence and Capacity Building

The second identified strength of the training workshops was that they supported confidence and capacity building. Many of the volunteers came to the workshops having recently experienced significant challenges in their lives. In the training workshops and the ESL conversation classes, many found a space to begin re-building their confidence and sense of self-worth. For example, after immigrating to Canada as an adult, Keith’s confidence was brought to a low point when he was bullied by co-workers at his place of employment in Vancouver. Keith shared how his participation in the training workshops and in the ESL conversation classes was a turning point for him:

I had some bad experience before, so I'm recovering you know, really well from that bad experience. I gain confidence in my language; at the same time, I'm happy that helping other people. That fact, I'm making a big difference in the life of others. Oh, thank you. (Focus Group, Dec. 2009)

The training workshops also supported confidence and capacity building by fulfilling the volunteer's initial motivations for participating in the program. These motivations, as shared by the facilitator participants, included giving back to the community (as in the case of Keith), doing something useful, adding structure to their life, meeting new people, learning from other cultures, pursuing their interest in ESL learning, being challenged, improving their own English or employability opportunities, being involved with something related to UBC, and sharing their skills and knowledge. The training workshop provided recognition of the volunteers' achievements through positive feedback from the trainer and peers. A certificate of completion and a letter of reference on UBC letterhead were also presented to all volunteers who completed the training.

3) Drawing on the Assets of the Volunteers

The third strength of the training workshops was that the assets of the volunteers were valued and drawn upon. Specifically, the trainers appreciated the volunteers' rich life experiences and acknowledged that these assets contributed significantly to the workshops and ESL conversation classes. As Mike explained:

So they're bringing that basic common sense, that kind of humanity, for what it's worth. I think empathy is another big thing they bring. (Interview, May 2010)

A clear demonstration of how the trainer drew on the volunteers' common sense and humanity occurred when Mike proposed the following scenario -- "What would you do if a learner came in late?" -- which could be considered a tricky question to answer. Yet, instead of seeing this as a potential problem for the classroom, the participants unanimously agreed that you should welcome the latecomer and continue on with the conversation at hand, a response that reflected their pragmatic orientation.

4) Support from the University

The fourth strength of the training workshops was the support received by a sponsoring university. Staff from the Learning Exchange's ESL Conversation Program identified that the support from the University of British Columbia was a necessity in terms of providing qualified human resources, material resources and physical space, as well as a widely-recognized brand name. Expanding on this last point, staff members commented that volunteer facilitators and learners were attracted to participating in the program because of its connection to the university. While the role played by UBC was not clearly identifiable to the volunteer facilitators, who for the most part assumed the connection was primarily financial, many spoke positively about the UBC staff they had interactions with. In the following conversation, several volunteers discuss the respect they have for their trainer, addressed by them as 'Professor' Mike, who they directly linked to university scholarship.

Sam: The intellectual atmosphere. I really appreciate that and I feel there is a sense of scholarship- scholarly feeling- whenever Mike speaks about the topic. So I enjoy it, I like it.

Researcher: Ok. Any other thoughts on the atmosphere?

Jarod: I think passion is an important element to have. I think it you know, it translates. Once you have somebody in there who really cares about what he is doing- it just kinda pulls us to everybody else, you know. People get excited.

Liz: It's contagious.

Jarod: It really is. And you really need someone who has a sense that what they are doing is important in their own lives. And that comes out with Professor Mike. ((general laughter)) (Focus group, April 2010)

The support provided by the university, however, was not without its tensions. The DTES community in Vancouver has been a hot-spot for various research projects over the years. Many community residents have grown cautious and even skeptical of university-based initiatives. Mike explained the tension that volunteers might have been feeling:

There's a tension for sure. UBC has got the cachet, it's a recognized program. It's not a rip-off, you're going to be well treated. It's got a professional reputation. But at the same time, this UBC maybe is going to be a bunch of intellectual snobs (Interview, May 2010).

Awareness of this tension prompted us to use the terminology of 'evaluation' as opposed to a 'study' when discussing the project with the participants. In the context of the Learning Exchange, 'evaluation' is the more familiar term; participants understand it as describing a variation of the sort of informal formative evaluation already routinely done, to elicit their feedback on the program and how it might be improved. 'Study', on the other hand, might suggest academics putting aspects of the DTES under the microscope, which would not be welcome.

Reporting of Findings

In May 2010, the CILS Research Committee collaborated with two volunteers at the Learning Exchange (who were also participants in the study) to give a presentation of the study's preliminary findings at the BC TEAL conference held in Vancouver, BC. The title of the presentation was *How Do We Equip Volunteers to Facilitate ESL Learning?*

In June 2011, the CILS Research Committee presented findings on the first research question at the CAUCE 2011 Conference in Toronto, Ontario. The presentation was titled *Key Strengths of an Innovative Volunteer Training Program*. The CILS Research Committee also submitted an article to the Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education (CJUCE) in July 2011, based on their presentation at the CAUCE conference, and under the same title. The article is currently under review.

In the fall of 2011, the Research Committee hopes to write a second article which shares their findings on the second research question: How does the ESL facilitator training workshop work as a Community of Practice? Committee members also plan to present the study's findings at UBC on the main campus and at the UBC Learning Exchange in the Downtown Eastside.

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The CILS Research Committee acknowledges and warmly expresses its appreciation for funding support from CAUCE and Continuing Studies at UBC which made this research project possible. We would also like to thank the staff and volunteers of the Learning Exchange's ESL Conversation Program for their interest, support, and participation in the study.

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