Reshaping Educational Experience by Investing in Community

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Abstract

The notion of “community” holds a key to enhancing higher education experiences for learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL), a core discipline of the vocational education and training (VET) sector in New Zealand. This paper contextualises the experiences of advanced EAL learners investing and participating in assessed community placements. Community placements represent a pedagogical intervention effectively giving learners access to communities of practice in a meaningful, authentic, real-world context. Pedagogically, they create learning contexts where instructors can reshape learners’ experiences by preparing students to explore and experience the linguistic and cultural potential of community. In the project, the journalised reflections of migrants and international students participating in a degree in EAL in New Zealand reveal the linguistic, cultural and ontological value of community work. The study uses the concepts of learner investment, communities of practice and imagined communities to theorise the participants’ learning, presents key qualitative findings about the cultural, linguistic, and transformative capital of community placements, and suggests they are valuable pedagogical interventions that can help reconfigure teaching and learning EAL in VET contexts.

Keywords: community of practice; cultural learning; community placement; investment

Introduction: Our need for belonging

Community: The Structure of Belonging (Block, 2008) opens with an opportunity for communities to re-engage: “The essential challenge is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole” (p.1). Our need to belong, Block maintains, comes from the isolation that characterises our silo-separated lives, institutions and communities due to the dominance of “our individualistic narrative” (p.2). The need to belong characterises anyone entering higher education, hence looking for a better future, such as Murphey Chen and Chen’s (2005) Taiwanese language learners motivated in the present by looking towards future imagined communities. Such needs may be marked among students of English as an Additional Language (EAL), variously migrants, refugees and international students, wanting to communicate in the social world (Cooke, 2001), and important for those studying in the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

This paper reports on a project in which learners experienced connectedness within effective communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and experienced some of the transformation Block describes. The project aims to identify the cultural, linguistic, and transformative capital of community placement (volunteering in a community context for a specified period) for advanced level students studying EAL. We aim to show that fostering “belonging” among learners who may feel cultural outsiders defragments learning experience by contextualising classroom learning with experience beyond the classroom, motivates invested learners
and builds a sense of both present belonging and the future self, one of Markus and Nurius’s “possible selves” (1986).

Andrew and Kearney (2007) define “community placement” as “any situated, experiential, participative activity that has the potential to provide a bridge from the classroom to the real world” (p.33). It is a course-related learning opportunity where participants spend a specified period in an approved community, a chance for learners to observe and participate in activities that happen normally as part of the regular operation of a group interacting, communicating and socialising at a particular site, in pursuit of a common goal, using discourse typical of their community. (p.32)

As previously mentioned, the communities in which students are placed share the defining features of CoPs and the learning is situated. In this project a community placement is a teaching intervention: an organised engagement between a provider and the world beyond the classroom, specifically the volunteer sector. This study describes some of those impacts and argues for the use of more community-targeted interventions such as community placement in teaching EAL to our migrant, refugee, study abroad and international students.

**Background**

Globalisation has impacted strongly on both export education, including study abroad programs, and education for migrants in such countries as New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Because of the need to cover a broad base, EAL courses in the VET sector are by and large carefully structured to scaffold accuracy-centred language learning, examination training (particularly IELTS), and workplace readiness/experience. But, workplace readiness programs excepted, curricula explicitly addressing the local cultural learning appropriate to the vocational focus of the VET sector have been lacking. This has led to the report *Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching: Implications for Effective Teaching and Learning* (Newton, Yates, Shearn & Nowitzki, 2010) which emphasises, “culture is no longer an invisible or incidental presence in language learning but instead is ... a strand with equal status to that of language” (p.1).

Arguably, the cultural content of many current VET EAL programs cannot satisfy the needs of the three main consumers of degree-level EAL courses. First, migrant learners (and refugees) need to learn about the social systems, institutions and social practices of their new country, and about how its people think and how they define themselves. Second, international students need to experience their host culture more deeply and interact with its people more closely so that they can situate themselves as effective global citizens in their future communities, whether in their home countries or whether they elect to migrate. Thirdly, study abroad students commonly report a desire for cultural immersion, often involving an impetus to learn about cultures and people from travel as well as classroom participation. Each of these three key groups has a desire for cultural experience. As Peterson and Coltrane (2003) wrote, cultural instruction should “allow students to observe and explore cultural interactions from
their own perspectives to enable them to find their own voices in the second language speech community” (p.2).

Community placement offers a pedagogical, curricular and/or assessment opportunity for reshaping such learners’ experiences of culture and language. It is an integral part of a BA (EAL) at Unitec New Zealand, where two units present portrayals of Kiwi culture in the classroom by elucidating the country’s bicultural heritage, multicultural migration history, media and arts, people who are leaders, social and political institutions and so on. We prefer the informal term “Kiwi culture.” It is appropriately casual, wide-ranging and inclusive, less fixedly monolithic and inflected with power than “New Zealand culture.” Community placements provide contexts where learners explore beyond the classroom and develop independent understandings of Kiwi culture by interacting in the second language (L2) speech community and experiencing its practices.

Community placements are assessed through learners’ presentations in oral and written forms. In keeping reflective journals of their situated learning and community experience, they record what they see, hear, think and experience, and reflect on the community and its participants, wider society and its people - and themselves. They chose, with lecturer support, volunteer help groups (such as Citizen’s Advice Bureaux, New Zealand Federation for the Blind); volunteer programs run by cultural sites (museums, aquaria, environmental groups); charity and aid organisations such as the Red Cross, clubs (soccer and racing clubs), church groups (Christian communities), lobby groups (e.g. initiatives organised by the police, refugee support groups or environmental action groups) and workplaces that take volunteers (rest-homes; pre-schools, primary and high schools and language schools). Participants’ diaries represent an ethnographic record of their investments in their target culture, and of their negotiation of evolving identities (Norton, 2000).

Participants

Seventy students from six intakes over three years participated in the community placement project. All students were second year BA (EAL) learners with academic IELTS bands of 6.0 or above (or equivalent). All students gave their permission for their words to be cited. All names cited are pseudonyms.

The subjects included refugees (3) migrants (39), international students (19) and study abroad students (9). The average length of time in New Zealand was three years, although one student had been in New Zealand for 31 years. All of the international students had studied in English language programs in New Zealand prior to their enrolment in the BA, so they had all been in New Zealand for at least 18 months. The study abroad students were in their first and only semester in New Zealand.

In terms of ethnic origin the participants comprise: Chinese (37), “Taiwanese” (4), “Hong Kongese” (3), Swedish (6), Korean (5), German (4), Japanese (2), and one each of Romanian, Iranian, Ethiopian, Somali, Thai, Malaysian, Indian, French Polynesian and Samoan. There were 42 females and 28 males. The age range was from 19 to 55, with a mean of 25.
Literature Review

This study is framed by four concepts current in literature on identity and language learning: the poststructuralist notion of *learner investment*; the social constructivist model of *communities of practice*, and how the idea of *imagined communities* extends CoPs into ideal and future conceptualisations of learner destination and impact on learner investments. Fourthly, imagined communities align themselves with current thinking around *possible and future selves*.

Experiencing English out of the safety net of the classroom may seem to put learners out of their comfort zone, but in fact it ups the ante – and exposes them to such authentic language as the idioms in this sentence. Clearly, though, taking part in learning interventions such as community placement requires what Norton Peirce (1995) saw as learner “investments”. Norton Peirce defined “investment” as signalling “the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (p.10).

Norton’s subsequent studies show a learner’s desire for affiliation to a chosen community enhances their investment in performing, learning, becoming a member, and developing confidence to engage in future imagined communities (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2005). Applied to community placements, learners’ natural interests suggest organic affiliations so the selection of a placement should capitalise on students’ desires. If they are interested in the mission of the community, they will be invested in its language and culture.

Research investigating connections between investment and identity in EAL contexts is, then, well-established. McKay and Wong (1996) charted connections between immersive learning and emergent identity in a group of teenage migrants to Canada, demonstrating how individuals’ needs, desires and negotiations served to determine their investment in their language learning. Norton (2000) studied a group of migrant women in Canada who recorded their investments in language learning in community contexts in “remarkable” reflective journals (p.148). These women socialised and communicated with more motivation among people in whom they had symbolic or material investments. Pittaway emphasised that when learners perceive a return on their investment, there is a concomitant feeling of empowerment (2004). Murphey et al. (2005) used EAL learners’ language learning histories as charters to project their investments in their future imagined communities. There is, Norton (2000, 2001, 2009) suggests, a connection between investment, desire to belong and become, and the construction of identities as learners and members of communities and society.

Second, the process of encouraging learners to become part of a community group can be conceptualised in terms of *communities of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) where expert learning can occur through initially peripheral participation. In such communities, new members trajectory from being “apprentices” with “legitimate peripheral participation” to having a deeper, engaged, invested interest involving “the whole person acting in the world” (Wenger, 1998, p.98).

Learning communities share the properties of CoPs and researchers of learning communities have applied this model to real world contexts including those of further tertiary study (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Morita, 2004) and for spoken English (Orton, 2005; Li, 2009).
The three core characteristics of CoPs (Wenger, 1998) are components of community placements. These are mutual engagement (the regular interactions of community members), joint enterprise (the members’ common endeavour, goal, vision or pursuit) and shared repertoire (ways of thinking, speaking, expressing, remembering common to the community). Like the new members of CoPs, learners in placements are participants in the evolving practices of their social community, participating alongside other volunteers and supervisors in mutual engagements and joint enterprises. In the process, they share repertoire, the language and cultural knowledge specific to the community. Importantly, their repertoire will also reflect the features of English spoken in practice in Kiwi community groups.

Thirdly, imagined community describes learners’ investment in learning as it impacts on future goals, ambitions and desires for belonging and recognition. Placing learners in such communities helps them behave like apprentice members. “Imagined community” originated in the work of Anderson (1983), and, placed alongside studies by Lave and Wenger (1991, 1998), is widely used in the research on EAL learner investment cited above. Kanno and Norton believe the analogy of nationhood and community helps those who want to belong feel a sense of community with people not yet met (2003).

This is useful because our learners have in their minds idealised visions of themselves as members of future academic, national, professional or creative communities. In their journals, the learners voice desires to become closer members of a target community or citizens of their new country; to achieve a good job, participate in higher education or go to a better university. Many, like the subjects of Orton (2005) and Li (2009), imagine themselves speaking better English within more fluent-speaker-oriented contexts. This framework allows, then, for desire to belong to be connected to desire to become.

Fourthly, while students might envisage themselves as future members of imagined communities, they might also possess conceptions of possible selves that differ from their current actual self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Dörnyei (2005, 2009) develops the theory that possible selves, particularly ought-to L2 selves and ideal L2 selves, are powerful motivators. The notion of possible selves concerns learners’ unrealised potential selves, ideal and imagined, drawing not just on their current competencies and the pressures of peers and family, but also on their hopes, wishes, aspirations and fantasies (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011). Positive experiences in learning situations like those community placements can achieve have impacts on motivation, learning and L2 identities, potentially making ideal selves seem more achievable. Pavlenko and Norton (2005) link possible selves to imagined communities. Like imagined communities, possible selves are tangible: we can “see and hear” them (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011, p.92).
Methodology

Research design

This project uses a grounded approach and qualitatively analyses emergent themes in learners’ reflective logs written during and shortly after the ten or more hour community placement required for the second year EAL subject, ‘Culture and New Zealand Society’.

During community placements, participants are instructed to write four diary entries of 200 words each and to comment on their observations of striking or contrasting aspects of Kiwi culture, aligning with the culture-teaching tenets of Byram (1997). Participants were told to write freely rather than create an error-free discourse. Unrestrained by discursive, generic or grammatical expectations, participants produce content-rich descriptions. Most learners made pen-and-paper notes (a few, with permission, made recordings) that they organised into texts for submission. Thus, participants freely provide individual descriptions of events and behaviours. Along with a group seminar and an evidence portfolio, these journals comprised the assessment material for the unit.

Instruments

Learner diaries were the main research instruments. Additional data was obtained from electronic text summaries learners wrote of their community-based learning and from transcriptions of group seminars in which learners discussed learning from their community placements. The data was collected in hard copy from students at the conclusion of the program and stored in a locked cabinet. To date, the researchers have used these data only to confirm themes emergent from the learner diaries.

Data coding and analysis

A grounded methodological approach (Glaser, 1998) was used. The method aligns with one Sandelowski (1995) uses in nursing. She uses a method of closely reading the material, identifying key storylines to understand everyday practices, underlining key phrases “because they make some as yet inchoate sense” (p.373). The two researchers used close reading to identify themes that emerged from the discursive data. Then they listed participant quotations under key categories. The researchers independently coded items for additional reliability, coming together to negotiate categories. The themes were listed in order of frequency from those mentioned by the majority of participants downwards with the assumption that themes more significant to participants would appear more frequently. The data emerges from six semesters of research so comprises a sufficient and reliable sample.

Limitations

Phenomenological and ethnographic studies rely on the stories of participants. In order to triangulate the effects of self-reporting that positivists may regard as unreliable, it is possible to organise on-site observations or to ask for on-site supervisors’ reports. A further possible limitation is that our participants were writing diaries as part of an assessment, so participants may have written what they thought
they wanted their lecturers to hear. A third apparent limitation may lie in our data analysis because our grounded method of analysing themes from discursive data relies on researcher judgment and subjectivity and is open to the charge of skewing data to fit hypotheses rather than letting themes emerge independent of any research question. Although we acknowledge these methodological limitations, we believe that we have represented the highlights of students’ experiences of learning in community in a way that captures their investment, and have analysed their broader stories in a valid and reliable way, exercising integrity and openness. The fact that the learners are invested in writing the journals because they are assessed may also be regarded as an advantage. In a future study, the students will create blogs recording their experiences, and the use of emergent technologies like I-pads will allow greater immediacy and candour.

Findings

Cultural and social capital of learning communities
Investment contributes to learning, and there is much data quantifying return on investment. There are, for instance, 15 cases where learners describe how far they have come or how much they have learned using the formula ‘how’ + adv. or adj.). Similarly, students use the comparative more (more confident, more aware) or other comparatives (closer, deeper). There are an equal number of commercial metaphors (learning described as “treasure”, “riches” or “valuable life experience”). These are all discursive and metaphoric indicators of return on investment. The majority of contexts are similar to that of Beth (China), who worked in a rest home:

Being a volunteer gives me a chance to contribute to NZ society … I have learned some typical Kiwi lifestyle, some Kiwi slang and pronunciation. More importantly, it’s a wonderful opportunity of broadening my perspective of NZ culture and society.

The following section describes the nine most significant types of cultural and social capital related to participation in community placements that emerge from the study.

Opportunities for speaking
The most significant “treasure” of community placement lies in its potential to provide opportunities for overhearing and participating in spoken interactions, particularly in the Kiwi idiom. Laura (China), for instance, wrote: “speaking with different people about new topics is helpful to my learning, in contrast to learning in the classroom”. Learners consistently remark that they heard “real” locals speaking “real” Newzild, New Zealand English. Tomas (Korea), one of 30 students to comment on features of Kiwi speaking, remarks that “Kiwi English is sometimes hard to understand or it is just funny to listen [to]. The words they use are often very informal (like bugger, crap, dude, etc.) and the pronunciation rises at the end of a sentence”. The participants learn about Kiwis’ laidback style and high rising terminal in the classroom, but actually noticing such features adds value to cultural learning as learners practice meaning-making in everyday life.
Acquisition of incidental skills

A by-product of learning in placements is the acquisition of procedural knowledge and problem-solving skills specific to CoPs. The descriptions of this type of learning are usually marked by “how to”. Dora (China), placed in a rest home, learned how to respond to healthcare crises. Beth learned, through real experience, “how to call 111” and Lee (China) learned how to articulate words carefully for elderly listeners. Procedural knowledge includes strategies of local communicative competence. Sandra (Hong Kong), a CAB volunteer, writes that her placement “teaches me techniques of how to communicate with native citizens and to work with them cooperatively”. Danny (Taiwan), a language school ambassador observing students’ orientation “learned how the counsellor slows down the speech and explains about life in both the school and city to the students”. Ria (Samoa), in a migrant support centre, realised she had the ability to communicate over cultural barriers: “[Placement] helped me to find appropriate communication styles when approaching different people”.

Increased confidence

When the learners detail their increased sense of self-identity, they quantify it in terms of a confidence boost: “My community placement gave me lots of confidence” (Anna, Germany). In this category, the data is marked by imagery of cultural capital and adverbs of quantity, intensity or comparison. Diana (China), a Red Cross volunteer, phrases it like this: “Being a shop assistant is such a challenging yet rewarding thing for me”. This enhanced confidence has impacts on other areas of achievement and on self-esteem, as in Sam’s (Malaysia) self-report: “community placements have boosted my confidence and taught me to be more attentive with instructions, flexible, organised, cooperative and being more responsible with myself and the tasks provided”.

Applying classroom learning

Community placements give students a social context to situate concepts and objects introduced in the classroom. Les (China), a volunteer at a community centre, remembers a core facet of Kiwi adaptability: “The Kiwi’s can-do attitude which we discussed in class has been well represented in this community centre.” Other students refer to problem-solvers reflecting the “number 8 fencing wire thingie” described in class and “the she’ll be right attitude”. Karina (Sweden), assisting in a charity shop, hears Kiwi idioms in practice:

I am really happy that I learned some kiwi slang in class because otherwise I would never understand. One man came in and I asked him how everything was, etc, and he started talking with a very hard kiwi accent, about that he just came back from the wopwops and that he was now looking for some gummies because it was about to rain.

For her, valuable learning occurred on re-cognising localisms observed in class: their cultural capital consists in hearing people using them communicatively and potentially being able to use them oneself.

Surprises

Many learners document episodes in which they describe their advancements in sociocultural knowledge about New Zealand, its people and language. These might be moments of recognition of classroom input, broader realisations of cultural learning
or deeper connections with the people they encounter. Examples include Ivor’s (China) realisation that his knowledge of the Treaty of Waitangi enables him to converse with a Maori co-volunteer; Malli’s (Hong Kong) reflection on the unforgettability of the war for rest home veterans; Karmen’s (Sweden) realisation that Kiwis are trusting people when she is allowed to handle money, and Jill’s (Thailand) recognition, during a Christian community’s trip to Rangitoto that she, now, belongs to this land. Dana (China) who chose the city mission made a personal connection with a Maori woman in penury but not bitter:

I felt Maori people’s kindness through her trusted eyes: they love to talk to people, they love to share their stories. They trust people, they stick together and care about each other even though they are in extreme life situation (sic).

Cultural contrasts
The data includes reflections on differences in attitudes to rest homes, the instructive actions of pre-school teachers and the relative value given leisure. Students identify differences in values and mores. New Zealand’s apparently laid-back work ethic, and seeming lack of corruption, bribery and tax fraud are mentioned. So, too, is New Zealanders’ ease in spending, use of hire purchase and the charity they exhibit in food banks and missions. Participants express surprise that people are open about their poverty and are not too proud to ask for charity. “New Zealanders”, writes CAB volunteer, Sandra (Hong Kong), “can get a community card that they use while seeing doctors. However, people who phoned in called it ‘poor people card’ in their native language”. A similar lack of stigma attacked to poverty appears in Peggy’s (China) description of Kiwis’ willingness to buy second-hand goods, and Les’s contrastive observation: “In China, if someone saw you go to ask for a food parcel, you will be looked down upon by others”. John (Sweden), in a student hostel, insightfully articulates the process:

It is inevitable that you will compare your own culture with foreign cultures. When I meet a Kiwi I will always try to find similarities and dissimilarities in his behaviour compared to my own … my experiences of New Zealand culture are not only a result of this country’s culture, but also of my previous culture … we are all influenced and nothing will be objective.

Sociopragmatic literacy
Students frequently instance sociopragmatic appropriacy, politeness strategies, and awareness of register as they express a new understanding of what is “the normal way” (Hwang’s – Korea - words) in local society. “In my workplace”, writes Andreas (Romania) “young people like to say some rude words when they are not happy such as *bugger, shit* and so on”. Noticing these phenomena allows learners to go one step further and enact their knowledge. Michaela (Taiwan) wrote that at first she “was a bit nervous about what I should say and what appropriate language to say to [a customer with a complaint]”. With her supervisor’s modelling, she managed to use appropriate language in future transactions.
**Opportunities to interact in global Englishes**

Seeing New Zealand’s multiculturalism reflected in the diverse demographic and linguistic make-up of CoPs represents cultural capital and allows for a reconception of New Zealand society that can potentially include them. A third of learners refer positively to the opportunity to communicate with people from a diverse range of backgrounds, most specifically Indian, Pacific Island and Maori. The data includes references to learners’ need to be exposed to a range of Englishes; their happiness at being with other “foreigners” in their CoP, and, most of all, to potential communication problems: “As people who call CAB are not very good English speakers, there are many problems during the translation process” (Ali, Ethiopia). The need for bilingual speakers, such as themselves, strengthens their resolve to contribute to society through their language skills in their future imagined CoPs.

**Desire to fit in**

The ninth key theme is learners’ desire to succeed as a participant within their chosen community and/or to become a member. This involves doing well through independent actions and being accepted by local people. Prior to her work with a Christian community, Margaret (China) hoped she could “do well and fit in”; by her third entry, she was describing incidents where she was a participant and a member (negotiating a recipe, supervising a barbecue). Ivor (China), after conversing with a Maori volunteer at an aquarium and demonstrating interest in Maori culture, “realized that understanding a culture could help me to integrate into society easily”.

Community placements offer learners to potential to move from peripheral, observational ‘outsideness’ to a participative ‘insideness’. After volunteering in her son’s soccer club, Miwa (Korea) writes:

> I have just been living in my own culture, not try to integrate the culture that I am living … the positive outcome for me is that I am trying to recognise real New Zealand culture and society. It is not from an outsider’s view, but it’s a view from a New Zealander, me.

For her, the impacts of community placement extend beyond sociolinguistic and sociocultural knowledge into something the researchers did not expect to find: knowledge of the changing self.

**Discussion**

This study has examined the value of community placements, a teaching intervention emerging from the observations that EAL programs need to address the cultural component of learning English in New Zealand (Newton et al., 2010), and that learners have difficulty finding authentic contexts in which to practice English skills (Cooke, 2001). If educational institutions and language instructors can facilitate the placing of individuals into appropriate CoPs, learners gain access to authentic contexts for understanding and practising many facets of communicative and sociopragmatic competence, at the same time witnessing and participating in the endeavours, enterprises and discourses of the community. This can be more than a learning opportunity: it can also be a context for belonging and can have transformative effects, as it did for Miwa and the participants who experienced
surprises or mini-epiphanies. Momentarily, they glimpse their ideal or possible selves (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

As the studies of investment by Norton Peirce (1995), Norton (2000), Murphey et al. (2005) and others suggest, understanding learning situated in communities helps conceptualise a learner’s being in the present as well as their potential to become in the future. As the L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) maintains, having opportunities and contexts to discover and rehearse ideal identity options is instructive and motivating.

The framework of investment, CoPs, imagined communities and possible selves has enabled us to detail how community placements encourage learners to connect class-based learning with the sociocultural world beyond; how they effectively apprentice learners to the community’s discourse and practices, and, to some extent, how cultural learning occurs. For instance, learners develop cultural capital in understanding local and national practices by noticing and reflecting on contrasts with their own cultures (Norton, 2000). When experiencing the ‘other’, learners understand it by identifying how it differs from or is similar to their own culture. Understandings of the treatment of the elderly or the education of pre-schoolchildren, for instance, evolve from a process of re-cognising the cultural model (Byram, 1997), comparing the new and other with the familiar and normal as John, cited above, understood.

This paper has selected some of the kinds of learning that occur when students are apprenticed to CoPs (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and made subject to the invested mutual engagements, committed joint enterprises and authentic shared repertoire of members. As the findings show, the language overheard and acquired goes beyond community jargon, and learners particularly value exposure to idiomatic and informal instances of authentic spoken English. They also value incidental workplace-specific skills and on-the-job communicative strategies, arguably because such skills accord with their visions of their possible selves in such future imagined communities as those of Kanno and Norton’s university students (2003) or Li’s Chinese learners of speaking (2009). Valuable, too, are opportunities to encounter Other Englishes as learners increasingly realise the importance of communicating with non-native speakers. The chance to connect with Maori brought life-changing cultural understanding to several participants.

Engaging in the CoPs that occur beyond the classroom has the capacity for EAL learners to attain images of themselves not only as more confident and competent communicators, participants and learners, but as individuals whose contribution can make a difference in a multicultural, globalised world. Norton (2000) has described these as “new images of possibility and new ways of understanding one’s relation to the world” (p.163). “It was such a small action”, wrote Dora (China) who worked in a rest home, “but I found I could make a difference”. Learners who are invested to discover cultural and social capital, report the positive, even transformative, educational experiences that Block (2008) characterises as connecting to the whole. Achieving a sense of belonging and membership as a relative newcomer to a community and to a culture builds self-belief in future memberships. Community placements can open the eyes of learners to places where they can further their social identities and bring ideal L2 selves into shaper focus.
Our findings suggest, too, that community placements build confidence, particularly the spoken confidence Orton (2005) and Li (2009) identify as particular investments among Chinese learners. This is largely because, we maintain, they provide a safe and supportive context for students to be themselves and invest in identities as community members. This new confidence in speaking gives learners new images of themselves as enabled and agential, making more possible the selves and imagined communities they aspire to.

Concluding remarks

EAL instructors who harness the value of real-world learning communities are in a powerful position to bring learners to an understanding not only of their own present and potential learning, but also of the impacts they are capable of having on others. Participation in a community context offers EAL learners – and future citizens of the local community, the nation and the world – authentic opportunities for assessing and considering linguistic transactions and cultural moments. These moments may lead students to a deeper appreciation of the commitment and practices of people who are members of their CoP, and hence of wider society. Such moments may also lead learners to a deeper appreciation of their possible selves; their place within the adopted or host culture, and their potential as agents in the world of human and humane activity. Partaking in a community placement can help to facilitate desires for membership and belonging, building a bridge from the classroom to possible present and future communities.

References


