

# Reshaping educational experience by volunteering in the community: Language learners in the real world

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## Abstract

This paper views tertiary language learners' gaining a sense of cultural belonging and an awareness of intercultural communication through three prisms: (i) the metaphor of "investment", (ii) the notion of "community of practice" and (iii) the concept of "imagined community". Applied to environments of real world learning, specifically the volunteer sector, the notion of "community" holds a key to reshaping the cultural education experiences for participants in language learning programs, including learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL). This paper examines facets of "community" to contextualise the experiences of learners in a project where advanced EAL learners undertook volunteer work as part of a cultural learning curriculum within a Bachelor of Arts in EAL at a tertiary institute in New Zealand. This project gave learners access to "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger 1992; Wenger 1998), providing contexts where instructors can reshape learners' higher education experiences by identifying cultural learning opportunities within the volunteer sector of the community. In educational research, the properties of community include *insider support, common goals, shared discourse* and *membership* (Rovai 2002a). The occurrence of such features in a student's volunteer placement depends on the degree of "investment" (Norton 2000; Pittaway 2004) participants have in individual and community goals. In the project, the journalised reflections of the participating migrants, refugees and international students reveal the cultural and ontological value of community work. This paper uses the concepts of real and imagined communities to theorise the participants' investments in their learning, presents qualitative findings from the project, and describes a range of benefits for EAL learners' learning in community. The paper concludes that investing in community can prepare learners for their future and imagined communities while reshaping significant aspects of cultural learning.

**Keywords:** volunteering, imagined communities, communities of practice, investment

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## Volunteering, community and 'belonging'

This paper is a study of volunteering as a teaching intervention for learners of additional languages invested in cultural as well as linguistic capital and in the idea that the opportunity to use target languages impacts on self-identity. It begins with understanding the value of learning in volunteer communities for students of additional languages. Not only does it provide exposure to and participation in situated, real world discourse; it also provides an apprenticeship to the cultural practices of a community and authentic opportunities to develop intercultural communicative insights through socialisation into the language and practices of the community. The study is predicated on the notion that language learners want to belong: to belong to a community of the target language, and to partake in its practices. Participation in volunteering, as we will see, has the potential to impact on learners' identities as learners of a target language by providing contexts where culture is practised authentically and often passionately. We will begin by unpacking "community", and the associated concepts of "imagined community" and "community of practice" to establish how volunteering facilitates a sense of belonging that proves invaluable in intercultural communicative language teaching and learning.

Block's *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (2008) opens with an opportunity for fragmented communities of disengaged individuals everywhere: "The essential challenge is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole" (p.1). The need to belong, he maintains, comes from the isolation that has come to characterise our silo-separated lives,

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institutions and communities due to the dominance of "our individualistic narrative" (p.2). This desire to belong characterises anyone entering higher education, but may be particularly marked among non-European learners of German, French or Swedish, for instance, or, as in the project described here, students of English as an Additional Language (EAL), variously migrants, refugees and international students. This paper reports on a project in which EAL learners experienced connectedness within learning communities, and hence experienced some of the transformation Block describes. The study aims to identify, but not quantify, the cultural, linguistic, and transformative capital of "community placement" (volunteering in a community context for a specified period, detailed below) for advanced level adult students studying EAL within a Bachelor of Arts program at a tertiary institute in Auckland, New Zealand.

Defining "community" takes a book (Putnam 2000; Block 2008). I will start with a paragraph. Broadly, "community" comprises "a set of voluntary, social, and reciprocal relations that are bound together by an immutable 'we-feeling'" (Foster 1996, p.25). Communities' elements are *mutual interdependence, sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals and overlapping life histories* (Rovai 2002a, p.4). Communities can be real or imagined, real or virtual. They can be communities of practice (CoPs), which can be communities of interest, purpose and passion (Tu & Corry 2002, p.209). Communities are constructed by interaction and are sites of individual and collective identity (Cohen 1985). "Community" involves invested social capital (Bourdieu 1986, 1991; Putnam 2000). This refers to connections among individuals and social networks and "the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam 2000, p.19). Belonging to communities unites networks and benefits individuals: "People, forming a community, come together because they are able to identify with something – a need, a common shared goal and identity" (Hung & Der-Thanq 2001, p.3).

Gaining a "sense of community" begins with feelings of membership, an affective, emotional sense of wanting to belong (Wenger 1998). In this project, "sense of community" involves the concepts of *support, common goals, shared discourse and desire for membership and relatedness* central to constructivist theories around communities of practice (Rovai 2002b, p.321) with the notion of "apprenticeship" (Wenger 1998; Cope 2005) at their core. Although empirical studies, particularly in the domain of community psychology, quantitatively measure "sense of community" (SoC) (McMillan & Chavis 1986, Chavis & Pretty, 1999; Rovai, et al., 2004), I do not apply measurements of either "SoC" or "invested social capital" here. Such measurements, it is argued, avoid the trap of attributing the values of community to what could be just "maudlin togetherness" (Sarason 1974, p.157). I limit my study to the affective domain, following Gunning (2007) in suggesting that positive pedagogical relationships, like those I argue are produced by community placements, depend to a great extent on the motivational and psychological aspects of teaching and learning. Recent research is producing important studies opening out these aspects into a distinct field connecting motivation and its affective underpinnings with L2 identity acquisition (Dörnyei & Ushioda 2009, 2011). Within affect, I acknowledge the importance of emotion in learners' language learning journeys (Arnold 1999), particularly in sociocultural studies using student narratives as data such as my own or Swain's (Swain, et al. 2010). Hence, I present findings based on learners' lived experience (Van Manen 1990).

First, the project required motivated "investments" on the part of the learner (Bourdieu 1986, 1991; Norton-Pierce 1995, Norton 2000, 2001, 2006, 2010; Pittaway 2004; Pavlenko & Norton 2005; Norton & Gao 2008). These investments need in part to be sold to the student by the enrolling institute and the instructors. 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). Investment in a discourse practiced in a learning community can lead to advances in self-knowledge and to individual and collective cultural capital (Norton 2000). Volunteering among Non English speaking Background (NESB) learners also impacts social capital (Leong 2008). Pittaway emphasises that when learners perceive a return on their investment, there is a concomitant feeling of empowerment (2004, p.204), a function of social capital. There is, Norton (2000, 2001, 2006, 2010) suggests, an immediate connection between learner investment, desire to belong and to become, and the construction of identities as learners and members of communities and society. The study shows that learners who invest in sense of community report positive even transformative educational experiences.

Second, the study can be conceptualised in terms of the social constructivist notion of "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998; Brown & Duguid 2000), where potentially expert learning can occur through initially peripheral participation in such a community. Learning communities share the properties of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Researchers of learning communities have applied this model to real world contexts (Morita 2004; Andrew & Kearney 2007). In such communities, new members move from being spectators or "apprentices" with "legitimate peripheral participation" to being potentially in possession of a deeper, engaged, invested interest involving "the whole person acting in the world" (p.98). These real world apprenticeships can potentially lay claim to being cognitive and/or discourse apprenticeships (Cope 2005). Like the new members of CoPs, learners in community placements are participants in the evolving practices and discourses of social communities (Rovai 2002a). Persistent investment in participation can motivate learners to reach their learning goals more effectively through the forming of strategic alliances with and within appropriate communities.

Thirdly, the concept of "imagined community" (Anderson 1983; Norton 2001, 2010; Kanno & Norton 2003; Pavlenko & Norton 2005; Murphey, Chen & Chen 2005; Norton & Gao 2008) can be applied. EAL learners imagine communities they wish to belong to, but as yet do not. Their imaginings can become explicit, as in this study, when they are called upon to write diaries of experience. Murphey, Chen and Chen (2005) demonstrated how EAL learners' language learning histories effectively project their investments in their future imagined communities.

A culture's sense of community is envisaged as an imagined space and individuals idealise community and create a sense of self through these imaginings (Anderson 1983). Kanno and Norton (2003) believe the analogy of nationhood and community helps would-be belongers feel a sense of community with people not yet met (2003, p.241). In 2008, Norton and Gao, summarizing literature on imagined communities in language education, wrote:

*Learners have different investments in particular members of the target language community, and the people in whom learners have the greatest investment may be the very people who represent or provide access to the imagined community of a given learner (p. 114).*

"Imagined community" describes learners' investment in learning as it is likely to impact on future goals, ambitions, dream communities and desires for belonging and recognition. These imagined communities, Murphey, Chen and Chen (2005) suggest "as learners want to belong to a community and construct their identities as members of the group, they invest energy and time into learning how to be like those members" (p.85).

In my study, as in Dörnyei & Ushioda's (2009) concept of the ideal L2 self, the learners have in their minds idealised visions of themselves as members of future academic, local, national or professional communities. Again, this thinking can be applied to the context of teaching European languages to non-Europeans as readily as to the context of EAL in New Zealand. The learners voice desires to become closer members of a target community or citizens of their new country; to achieve a good job (either in New Zealand or their home community), participate in higher education or go to a better university in a course of their choice. Many imagine themselves speaking better English within more native-speaker-oriented contexts. The concept of imagined communities provides a framework to understand that learners' investment in a present community can impact both on future membership in a desired community and on the individual and personal education they need to undertake in order to warrant future membership. This framework allows, then, for desire to *belong* to be connected to desire to *become*.

All three of these concepts, "investment", "CoP" and "imagined community" fit with frameworks focussing on linguistic and cultural learning through the kinds of participation and socialisation that characterise volunteering. The situating of learning in the social world where identities are figured derives from the work of Lave and Wenger (1991, 1998). Norton's notions of investment by learning in community and its connection with evolving learner identity (Bourdieu 1986, 1991; Norton 2000) sit alongside constructivist models of identity negotiation. The poststructuralist analysis of second language acquisition as "language socialisation" (Pavlenko 2002; Duff 2007) provides a further framework for

understanding connections between participation in community and identity. Within environments of real world learning, learning in community is participative and situated. Packer and Goicochea (2000) summarise: "the sociocultural conception of identity addresses the fluid character of human beings and the way identity is closely linked to participation and learning in the community" (2000, p.229). This sociocultural conception of self, explored in narratives and subject to emotion, is the subject of a new work by Swain et al. (2010).

## **Background to the study**

### **Community learning, learning community and community placement**

The terms "community learning" and "learning communities" share some overlap. In *community learning*, educational value is brought to both the members and the community through community engagement, and learning is both horizontal and vertical. Participating together, sharing the same outcomes and learning horizontally characterise *learning communities* (Tu & Corry 2002, p.210). Interactions are, Brown and Duguid (2000) maintain, demand-driven, a social act and an act of identity formation (p.251).

Students undertaking a community placement are participating in both community learning (because there is mutual benefit between participant and community) and a learning community because the communities in which students are placed share the defining features of CoPs. Community learning can involve participants of any background, but in my study, I examine the cultural and linguistic learning acquired by EAL learners participating in community placement as a method of real-world experiential learning beyond the classroom.

What, then, is a community placement? Andrew and Kearney (2007) define it as "any situated, experiential, participative activity that has the potential to provide a bridge from the classroom to the real world" (p.33). In particular:

*A community placement is a course-related, pre-arranged learning opportunity where participants spend a specified period in an approved community context to achieve defined sociocultural and/ or sociolinguistic outcomes. It represents 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)*

### **Reshaping educational experience through community placement**

Globalisation, with its infusive discourse of immigration, increasing understanding of cosmopolitanism and emphasis on global citizenship, has impacted strongly on both export education, including study abroad programs and language learning for international students, and education for migrants or refugees in such countries as New Zealand and Australia (Hatoss 2006). Although many EAL contexts may cater specifically to international students, it is increasingly common for tertiary contexts to teach international student migrants and refugees within a single program. Students in such programs obviously have a range of investments in cultural learning about the host country (Hatoss 2006) but globalisation brings an awareness of the importance of intercultural communication in a world where speaking English effectively is capital (Pavlenko & Norton 2005). While tertiary-level EAL courses for adults were until very recently in general structured to scaffold authentically communication-focused language learning and skills/strategies-based examination training, today there is emphasis on both intercultural communication (Hatoss 2006; Newton et al. 2010) and explicit instruction for workplace apprenticeship (Leontis et al. 2007; Burns & Joyce 2007; de Bres et al. 2009). In New Zealand, the Victoria University report *Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching: Implications for Effective Teaching and Learning* articulates this new emphasis: "Culture is no longer an invisible or incidental presence in language learning but instead is ... a strand with equal status to that of language" (Newton et al. 2010, p.1). Teaching and learning interventions foregrounding cultural understanding are then increasingly important in infusing language learning with authenticity.

This fresh emphasis on the intercultural nature of communication-focused language instruction has the potential to cater more effectively to the real world needs of the three main consumers of degree-level learners enrolled in EAL courses. First, migrant learners 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 more useful global citizens in their future communities, whether they are back in their home countries or whether they, too, elect to migrate. Thirdly, study abroad students commonly report a desire for cultural immersion, often involving a desire 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 via volunteerism offers a pedagogical, curricular and/or assessment opportunity for reshaping such learners' experiences of culture and language. It is an integral part of two subjects within a BA (EAL) at Unitec New Zealand, 'Culture and New Zealand Society'. These units present portrayals of New Zealandness in the classroom by elucidating the country's bicultural heritage, migration history, film, media and arts, people who are achievers, and so on. More importantly, they provide contexts where learners are encouraged to explore beyond the classroom and experience culture, interacting in their target language in the process. Engagement with a local community brings about cultural learning so an assessed community placement is an innovative way to shape experience (Andrew & Kearney 2006, 2007).

Community placements are assessed through learners' presentation of their learning in oral and written forms. In keeping reflective journals of their situated learning and community experience, participants become ethnographers, recording what they see, hear, think and experience, and reflecting on the community, wider society and its people and themselves. They chose, with lecturer support, volunteer help groups (such as Citizen's Advice Bureaux, Federation for the Blind, Migrant Help); volunteer programmes 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). The members of the volunteer communities, while not necessarily always native speakers or even speakers of New Zealand English, are aware that they will be linguistic and cultural ambassadors in the students' ethnographic journeys. It is often they who trigger participants' initial feelings of belonging.

The pedagogic aims of participating in and writing reflectively about community placement are cultural competence (Byram 1997), cultural autonomy (Dlaska 2000; Sercu 2002) and cultural literacy. This involves gaining group membership and co-constructing their social practices (Cho 2006, p.1). Participants' diaries, then, represent an ethnographic, phenomenological record of their investments in their target culture, and of their negotiation of evolving identities (Norton 2000, p.152).

## **Methodology**

### **Research design**

This project qualitatively analyses emergent themes in learners' reflective logs written during and shortly after a ten or more hour community placement required for the year 2 course, *Culture and New Zealand Society*, in a BA (EAL).

During their ten hours of community placement, participants were instructed to write four diary entries of 200 words each and to comment on their observations of any striking aspects of Kiwi culture. Participants were told to write freely and openly, rather than to create an error-free discourse. Most learners made pen-and-paper notes (a few, with permission, made recordings) that they wrote up as e-texts for submission as soon after the placement as possible. Because diaries record learners' investments and chart changing identities, they provide useful qualitative data (Norton 2000, p.152). In diaries,

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participants freely provide individual descriptions of events and behaviours. Unrestrained by discursive, generic or grammatical expectations, participants produce content-rich descriptions.

## Participants

The current corpus consists of the reflective logs of 70 students from six intakes over three years. All students are second year BA (EAL) learners with academic International English Language Testing System (IELTS) bands of 6.0 or above. 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 programmes 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, Somalian, 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.

## Instruments

Learner diaries were the main research instruments. Additional data was obtained from electronic text summaries learners wrote of their community-based learning. The data was collected in hard copy from students at the conclusion of the programme and stored in a locked cabinet.

## Data coding and analysis

A grounded methodological approach (Strauss & Corbin 1990; Glaser 1998) was used during this research. The two researchers used open coding to locate themes that emerged from the data. Then they listed participant quotations under key categories. The researchers used methods from discourse and metaphor analysis to locate lexical and thematic similarities in the data. The two researchers independently coded items for additional reliability, later coming together to negotiate the semantics of categories. The themes were listed in order of frequency from those mentioned by the majority of participants down to those described by only several. The data reported here emerges from six semesters of research. Data from each semester confirms that collected from previous semesters. Hence, this data comprises a sufficient and reliable sample.

## Findings

### Cultural capital of learning communities

Investment and engagement contribute to learning, and there is much data in the corpus quantifying return on investment. There are 15 instances 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, who worked in a rest-home:

*I strongly believe that I have not only enriched my knowledge of NZ culture and experiences, but also be aware of the cultural activities, which cover visual arts, festivals, some of which are celebrations of national cultures ... 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 key themes of types of cultural and social capital that learners identify. These findings relate to participation in both community learning and communities of practice.

**Opportunities for speaking** The most significant cultural capital of community placement is its potential to provide opportunities for overhearing and participating in spoken interactions. Laura, for instance, wrote: "speaking with different people about new topics is helpful to my learning, in contrast to learning in the classroom". She articulates a tension between the "real" world and the classroom that resonates throughout the data. Learners also report on their application of classroom spoken communication strategies. Rosa, in a migrant centre, learned "to be humble and open-minded. That is the best way to keep a conversation very interesting and last for a long time." John, in a hostel, demonstrates socio-cognitive awareness:

*During my community placement I found myself in situations where I couldn't find the words and expressions I was looking for, but I managed to explain what I meant anyway. To talk around words you don't have in your vocabulary is a very effective method.*

Learners consistently remark that they heard real locals speaking real *Newzild*, New Zealand English. Tomas, one of 30 students commenting 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 learners learn about Kiwis' laidback style and high rising terminal in the classroom, but noticing such features adds value to cultural learning as learners practice meaning-making in everyday life.

**Applying classroom learning** Community placements give students a real context to see concepts and objects introduced in the classroom. These concepts, seen again in the CoP, become part of a learner's shared repertoire. Les, 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" mentality described in class and "the *she'll be right attitude*". Karina, 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.

The course also covers the features of New Zealand English. In the community, students get to hear for themselves. Sophia, participating in a shellfish-monitoring programme, listened closely enough to identify Kiwi features in her supervisor's speaking:

*By listening to John's speech, I felt his Kiwi pronunciation is heavier than our teachers' but more light than other Kiwis'. I only could recognise his vowel sound /e/ when he said "instead", he said 'instid'.*

Beth, in a retirement home, is even more perceptive and makes a socio-cultural observation:

*Older people are more likely to pronounce words like 'grown, thrown' with one syllable, and younger people ... with two syllables ('growen, throwen').*

Such comments testify to a developing socio-cultural literacy as well as evidence of socio-cognitive process of recognising patterns introduced in the classroom.

**Surprises and re-cognitions** Many learners document episodes in which they describe their advancements in socio-cultural knowledge about New Zealand, its people and language. These might be moments of "surprise" (Norton 2000, p.152), moments of re-cognition of classroom input, or broader

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realisations of cultural learning. The most expressive metaphor of moving through a transitional space towards self-knowledge occurs in Moira's analysis of her progression:

*I have tried to take part in their social activities. However, I couldn't understand them at all. I felt that I am standing out of the door, I can see through windows, I can hear their sounds, I can copy their actions but I don't know why they do that ... now I do not worry about this. I have learnt their culture, although not completely. I talk with them much more confidently and state my opinion.*

Even after her placement Kiwis remain "them", and Moira remains a mimic not a member, peripheral in a CoP. Commenting at first on Kiwi symbols during a visit to a retirement village on April 25, Dora writes:

*Anzac Day, poppies, Anzac biscuits. A lot of elderly people fairly enjoyed a traditional ANZAC biscuit, and enjoyed the pleasure of reminiscence as well. Stories and laughter filled the coffee inn ... one elderly dipped her Anzac biscuit in her tea and she was shaking. I could see a tear in her eye.*

Other examples include Ivor's realisation that his knowledge of the Treaty of Waitangi enables him to converse with a Maori co-volunteer; Malli's reflection on the memory of the war for rest home veterans; Karmen's realisation that Kiwis are trusting people when she is allowed to handle money, and Jill's recognition, during a Christian trip to Rangitoto that she, now, is a part of this land.

**Cultural contrasts** Learners develop cultural capital in understanding local and national practices by noticing and reflecting on contrasts with their own cultures (Norton 2000, p.152). 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). The data includes reflections on differences in attitudes to rest-homes, the instructive actions of pre-school teachers and the relative value given leisure. Jean observes: "Instead of having formal teaching and learning, the kindergarten provides a variety of activities ... promoting kids' interests in exploring". John, in a student hostel, 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.*

An example of this comparison appears in Les's diary. Les is an adult migrant who participated in the activities of a local community centre.

*Asians do not come [to the foodbank] very often; Maori people seem to come more often. ... But every time I saw Maori or Polynesian people come to the food bank, they were still happy. You can't see any difficulties or unhappy feelings on their face. It not only shows Kiwis' strong community support but also their optimistic spirit ... In China, if someone saw you go to ask for a food parcel, you will be looked down upon by others.*

Students identify differences in values and mores. New Zealand's 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, "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 attached to poverty appears in Peggy's 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".

**Desire to fit in** Another key theme to introduce here is the desire to succeed as a participant within their chosen community and/or to become a member. This involves both doing well, through their own

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actions, and being accepted by local people. Prior to her work with a Christian community, Margaret 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, 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 a society easily".

The process of fitting in is facilitated by the attitudes of workers in the volunteer sector. On day 2, Karmen wrote: "It feels like I am part of the staff now because the people who work there are counting on me and trust me." Such positive experiences impact on learners' perceptions of themselves as operating in future imagined communities. This is shown by Spring's remark about a Waitangi workshop: "I've learned everyone is different; everyone is entitled to their own opinion and beliefs... I believe this point will benefit my future work and study".

Finally, 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 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 socio-cultural knowledge into something the researchers did not expect to find: knowledge of the changing self.

**Imagined communities** Half the participants report that they have had a lack of opportunity to communicate with Kiwis during their New Zealand experience and that their goal was to speak with local people in the real world. "That's why", writes Sara, "I embraced my community placement with both hands".

The community placement is an interim imagined community where learners can trial the literacies and identities they need for future imagined communities. Karen begins her journal with the words: "I believe that to be a volunteer of Asian Health Support Service is the start of my career in New Zealand". Diana, who worked in a Red Cross shop, articulates the connection between her imagined community and her community placement:

*The original motivation for me was to plan ahead with my future career. As New Zealand work experience is demanded, I thought taking a volunteering job not only gives me an opportunity to participate in society and help other community members, but also affords me a window to observe New Zealand society, gain some experience in working in customer service area, and most importantly practice my English language.*

Students are surprised by their own abilities to make a difference to others and to discover things for themselves. This new confidence gives them a glimpse of a future self-identity. Zheng, who had worked in McDonalds, decided to train to work there during his holidays instead of going back to China: "It gives me a real life lesson in society. I will continue working in this multicultural workplace during my summer holiday, and I will discover more". Cynthia reflects on her rest home experience: "it was a great opportunity to improve my listening and speaking skills, and I wish that I could do something similar to this in my future". Dany, who after her placement wants to be an interpreter writes: "Now I have visited the police station, seen how they treat suspects, attended their conferences and meetings, I would be happy to help to build a bridge between police and the Chinese community." For others, the experience of learning in community leads to a promise to the self. "I will be looking forward to being a volunteer sometime in the future", wrote Faith, a rest home volunteer.

Ivor, stationed at an aquarium, writes on day one of a Maori volunteer and hopes to have a chance to meet him. This desire has all the qualities of an imagined community. His day two entry describes the meeting:

He was funny. He said *chaofan* (fried rice) to me because he knows I am a Chinese. I was surprised. Then we started a conversation. I really wanted to have a good start, so I showed him my knowledge of Maori with asking his *iwi's* name. He told me his *iwi's* name is

*Tomokagna* (not sure about the spelling, I did not write it down immediately). Then we talked about the Maori *tikanga*. I could feel his happiness about my knowledge of Maori because it is not common that an international student especially a Chinese student knows so much about Maori. I realized that understanding a culture could help me to integrate into a society easily.

Ivor's learning goes beyond linguistic and cultural literacy into both a humane learning and the realisation that such transactions can create a bridge between people and lead to acceptance and even what is obviously his desire, "integration".

Seven students admit to having never imagined being a part of a community in New Zealand, but all are grateful for the cultural and social capital gained. Grace writes: "if the class didn't ask me to do the community placement, I wouldn't have done it". She overcomes her fear, and by the time she finishes her diary she writes: "It was a good chance to get a bridge into real life in New Zealand. I'm going to continue to do the volunteer work all I can", adding that her involvement in the volunteer sector gives her a pride in New Zealand that she had not had before. Perhaps the most interesting one on this theme is Jean, who decided to accept the Jehovah's Witnesses' fourth invitation to join a Bible study because she needed to find a placement for her course. In her first diary entries she writes that "it was a good chance to practice reading and speaking"; by the end of the diary, struck by the community's encouragement and interest in her, her family and her culture, she has become a keen member of the group, spending 5 hours per week in a Bible study group. Her motivation remains academic and not religious: "It sounds like I am taking an extra paper for my BA course". This is a big step for her as, she relates, Jehovah's witnesses are banned in China. In her case, being part of a learning community is more important than the content and mission of that community.

For the 16 students who became permanent volunteers, realising a type of imagined community leads to a desire to be more deeply involved. In these journals, there is a strong of a changed outlook and a changed person with a new curiosity and power to discover for themselves. "I feel like I can make a difference", writes Sara, one of 5 students who became fully trained Citizens' Advice Bureau helpers. "It was only a small task, but I could feel her smile", writes rest home worker, Beth, who lived on-site for a year with two other former 'Culture and New Zealand Society' students-turned-volunteers. Helping others also gives her what she calls a "window into New Zealand culture". Karmen, in a Maori preschool wrote in her third entry: "It feels like I am part of the staff now because the people who work here are counting on me and trust me". . These students are almost all adult migrants (7 of 16) or refugees (3, Somalia, Ethiopia) with strong investment in a Kiwi future, or potential Bilingual tutors or language teachers (5 others). Somali refugee and CAB volunteer, Mora wrote: "I want to return something to this country which gave my family a home".

## Conclusions

This study has presented a context in which targeted instruction that harnesses "community" can bring students closer to achieving those course outcomes that accord with their own their goals and their desires to become participating, communicating members of a community marked by its discourse. At the same time getting the full potential out of "community" can afford learners incidental but invaluable windows into their own creative and humanitarian potential. These windows, offered by the students' reflective journals allow us to view the cultural and social capital students consider themselves to have gained.

This paper has used the concept of imagined communities to suggest that investment in the learning community is crucial if participants are to gain cultural and social capital that can help them to achieve future goals beyond present learning community. Instructor interventions such as suggestions of places for future work can be invaluable here. Understanding learning situated in learning communities helps us to conceptualise learner's need to "be" in the present as well as their ability to "become" in the future. Having the chance to explore a range of identity options can be both instructive and motivating for learners from other language speaking backgrounds. Jill, a Thai migrant, writes of her chance to go this:

"I have been to Rangitoto Island twice and I am feeling that I am more appreciative of where I am and who I am". Sense of ease with place arguably impacts on sense of self for all language learners, non-European learners of European languages for instance, not just EAL learners in New Zealand.

Participating in community impacts on the construction of multiple identities. In providing learners with the chance to explore such options, instructors accord with constructivist, socio-cultural and poststructuralist notions of identity. Identities, in flux, a site of struggle, but also capable of amazing resilience, are formed and negotiated in situated social environments such as learning communities. Learning that involves a new awareness of oneself and ones place in the world is valuable both as cultural and social capital.

Instructors of those working in learning communities and involved in community learning 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 humanly capable of having on others. Instructors can harness community to find the "spaces for the enhancement of human possibility" that Norton's migrant women located in their journals (Norton 2000) and that many of the students whose words appear in this paper found as they reflected on their community placements. "It was such a small action", wrote Dora who worked in a rest home, "but I found I could make a difference".

The concepts of learning community and community learning offer great potential for meaningful, lifelong learning of culture and language for EAL learners, whether they are migrants, international students and refugee learners, and for learners of foreign languages such as those encountered in Europe. Participation in a community context provides many 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 community of practice, and hence of wider society. Such moments may also lead learners to a deeper appreciation of their place within the host culture, and of their potential as agents in the world of human and humane activity. Partaking in a community placement can help to facilitate desires for integration, membership and belonging. In 16 cases, students gained so much from the experience of placement that they desired to remain in that community of practice. For example, one Korean woman who was placed as a volunteer with the New Zealand police has qualified as an interpreter so that she can fulfil the liaison work she had started in the Korean community in Auckland during her placement, and a Chinese woman, Dany, imagines herself doing the same for her community.

Understanding one's own imagined future self and representing it to your learning community can, as we have seen, have unforeseen positive outcomes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my thanks to the Chinese professor for providing me the data for analysis. For reasons of confidentiality, the professor will remain anonymous.

<sup>2</sup> Winter vacation time in China is determined by the Spring Festival each year, so it is not fixed. Generally speaking, schools start winter break a couple of weeks prior to the Spring Festival (January 1 according to the Chinese Lunar Calendar), mostly in Mid or Late January or early February.

<sup>3</sup> I used the word episode with a purpose. An episode is one part of a longer or larger story. If we consider the interaction between two related individuals as a story, then this story is composed of many episodes. Each episode here consists of back-forth email correspondences between G and Y. There is a significant period of pause or suspension between two episodes. Also each episode is indicated by an emerging issue or problem.

<sup>4</sup> Ting-Toomey (2005) defined status face as "our need for others to admire our tangible or intangible assets or resources such as appearance, social attractiveness, reputation, position, power, and material worth" (p. 81).

<sup>5</sup> Inclusion face is concerned with "our need for others to recognize that we are worthy companions, likeable, agreeable, pleasant, friendly, and cooperative". Reliability face is concerned with "our need for others to realize that we are trustworthy, dependable, reliable, loyal, and consistent in our words and actions." Competent face is concerned with "our need for others to recognize our qualities or social abilities such as intelligence, skills, expertise, ...and problem-solving skills" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 81).

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