

# DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS



BY DEBORAH S. REISINGER

## Creating a Sustainable Community Partnership

Six years ago, a colleague called to let me know that she had some exciting news: a local agency had started resettling Central African refugees in our town. My heart skipped a beat. I had always been envious of my Spanish colleagues whose students had so many opportunities to interact with native speakers. Finally, my French students might also be able to participate in a service-learning experience. They might even begin to expand their ideas of what is “French.” In addition to cheese, châteaux, and the “standard” Parisian accent, my students would come to also associate French with cassava, agrarian lifestyles, and linguistic variation. This could even be the start of a larger shift in perspective.

I picked up the phone and called the agency that very afternoon. Everything else, as they say, is history. The subsequent meetings, course proposals, home visits, and training sessions would radically alter the course of my teaching and research agenda. More importantly, they would change how my students experience learning French, how they relate to the refugee community, and how Francophone refugees experience America.

Today, after five years of sustained partnership, we have established a relationship of mutual trust and respect with a community partner that seeks our guidance and on whose expertise we rely.

## Getting Started

To launch this initiative in 2013, I created a new course: *Issues in global displacement:*

*Voix francophones*, to ground our community partnership. I wanted students to have foundational knowledge about how a person becomes a refugee, including the history, politics, and laws that govern asylum seekers. Why, for example, do individuals flee the Democratic Republic of the Congo and how do they gain refugee status? To build this knowledge, students study the political history of countries in conflict, as well as UNHCR policy and international law.

I also wanted students to develop empathy and understanding, so we read first-person narratives of resettlement authored by French-speaking refugees (e.g., Bepou-Bangue’s *La troupe de Bemba était tombée sous nos têtes*, Thúy’s *Ru*, Laferrière’s *Chronique de la derive douce*).

Laid atop this coursework is a service-learning experience that places students in partnership with Francophone refugees via our community partner, a resettlement agency. Each week, students spend one to two hours with their assigned families acting as cultural and linguistic brokers. Their tasks are broad and often reflect moment-to-moment needs: translating flyers that children bring home from school, helping to set up a Wi-Fi connection, explaining an electricity bill, or visiting a local market.

## Laying the Foundation for Productive, Authentic Partnerships

During the first years of our partnership, most of our energy was focused on the students: making certain that they were meeting

service expectations, developing activities and strategies that they could employ during their weekly visits, and developing reflection prompts to offer opportunities for transformative learning. I have written about this experience (Reisinger 2014; 2017), detailing how we set up our service-learning partnership, as well as how we managed student expectations and responded to moments of resistance.

In this article, I want to focus on how we have developed our partnership with the refugee resettlement organization over the past five years, including some of the challenges we navigated which led to the creation of a sustained, authentic, and productive relationship.

This partnership is constructed on a maze of relationships between and among different participants (students, refugee families, community organizations, myself), staged in a variety of spaces (classrooms, homes, offices, city spaces) and spanning varying lengths of time (an hour, a semester, or multiple years). While I have at times tried to untangle this complex web of interactions, I have more recently come to embrace the complicated and thorny nature of this work. Resisting its complexity was like swimming upstream, and when I began to acknowledge that everything is interdependent, our work began to flow more easily.

What follows is a set of promising practices that can help sustain mutually beneficial community partnerships.



**Define your partnership.** What are your shared goals and objectives? What is your commitment to one another, and how will you ensure that you are working together toward those goals?

It is critical to *articulate* this shared vision. When we first began our community partnership, we did not have a goal, but rather a loosely defined practice in mind: Our students would help refugee families learn English. We soon discovered that our students weren't equipped to do this very well. They didn't have the necessary tools and training, and I hadn't set aside enough class time to teach these strategies. Mine was a course on refugee resettlement, after all, not on teaching ESL. My students had also set unrealistic expectations for their partnerships, sometimes unconsciously. In their reflective blogs, they expressed dismay that their partners had not progressed as they had hoped, and that their families were still struggling with basic vocabulary; they blamed themselves, even though no one had ever set such expectations.

By modifying the language of our goals and reframing the parameters of our partnerships, I was able to establish more realistic hopes. What we *could* offer was conversational practice and cultural orientation. This new language lowered the anxiety of both our students and their partner families, allowing them to build a relationship of mutual learning. Each semester, such small adjustments have helped us move closer to our shared goals.



**Establish guidelines that foster mutual trust.** What kinds of guidelines and practices cultivate community, trust, and respect?

It's important to begin by establishing a mutually agreed upon set of ground rules (e.g., showing up on time to weekly meetings, not posting photos on social media). Consistently following these rules builds trust. When a student cancels a meeting at the last minute, trust is broken and is not easily repaired. Reflective writing can help students manage these breaches (what unspoken fears might have led them to cancel a meeting?), but there are fewer mechanisms for supporting families through such challenging moments. This is an area we are working to address by developing tighter feedback loops that allow for more immediate interventions.

Consistent get-togethers help establish relationships. Partners jumpstart this process by inviting each other to share activities, such as cooking a meal together, visiting an art museum, or attending a sports event on campus. Teachers should also seek opportunities to connect with families, and especially with the partner organization. As the liaisons for these partnerships, our role should be visible to students and to the community. Attending rallies hosted by the organization, inviting a community caseworker to speak to a class, or hosting a picnic in a local park are all excellent, low-stakes ways to build relationships outside of weekly service hours. Hosting and attending events in neutral locations can also help deconstruct campus/community divides, encouraging students (and community members) to break out of comfort zones.



LEFT: Getting together at a community fall picnic.



RIGHT: Attendee at a museum exhibit opening.



### Avoid fixing “problems.” What are the community’s real wishes? Can we realistically fulfill them?

Sometimes we make assumptions about what a community partner wants or needs, and we set out to solve a problem that may not even exist. A student approached me recently about creating a fresh produce delivery service to refugees in an area neighborhood. Had she been familiar with this neighborhood, she would have known that there already is a local Saturday market (affectionately called *le marché africain*), and that most families put home-cooked meals on their table five nights a week. Her idea was well-intentioned but reflected a limited knowledge of the community. Our partner agency has shared similar examples of misguided help. There was a recent outpouring of volunteers offering to develop apps that would help support resettlement, but they had not considered that many refugees do not have reliable wifi or data plans on their phones.

This reflex to want to “fix” the community is problematic. It invokes a charity model of service in which volunteers do not have to know or even interact with the community (serving in a soup kitchen, painting a mural, holding a fundraiser). While this transactional work has its place in some contexts, it does little to change the way our students consider the underlying structures that keep people in poverty, or that reinforce systemic racism. Somewhat ironically, this type of volunteer work can be harmful to our students; if they do not reflect on this work, it may even reinforce the very notions of power and privilege that we wish to question.



### Assess community needs. How do we know what our community partners need?

Quite simply, we must ask and observe during regular contact with both the agencies and the individuals who support them. Sustained partnerships provide us with this opportunity.

For example, several refugee parents told us that they wanted more practice with daily, conversational English, especially on the phone. They expressed frustration when making doctor’s appointments, and wanted more practice making phone calls. The resettlement organization had shared a related concern the year before, noting that their volunteers had requested more tools to practice English conversational skills.

My students, who had both observed and experienced this challenge firsthand, asked how we might help and what delivery mechanism might be most accessible for all parties. Conversations led us to develop a series of short videos to help address this need. A website ([dukehello.com](http://dukehello.com)) hosts these and other materials that capture everyday interactions like leaving a tip, writing an email, filling a prescription at the pharmacy, getting pulled over by the police. Translated into French and Swahili, the materials can be used by volunteers during home visits, as well as by individuals who wish to practice interpretive skills. Because of our sustained partnership with this organization and regular course offerings, we have been able to add to the site every semester, improving it based on feedback from the lived experience of ESL teachers, volunteers, and our community partners.



### Establish clear mechanisms for feedback. How do you know that your partnerships are productive, mutually beneficial relationships that should go forward?

The structure of a semester-long class provides multiple opportunities for faculty to gather feedback about how partnerships are developing. From casual conversations before and after class, to structured reflection sessions, to formative assessments such as writing prompts, it is relatively easy to keep tabs on our students’ relationships with their community partners. Less obvious, however, is how to assess this relationship from the perspective of the community partner.

At the beginning of each term, when teachers meet with community partners to align goals and expectations, it is crucial to agree on how feedback will be offered to all parties. Should students contact the teacher or the organization when a family is not home at a scheduled meeting time? Should the agency directly address the student who did not participate in the ESL training, or should it reach out to the teacher, or both? How often should there be reflection sessions to gather group feedback, and who should lead (and attend) these? The mere act of posing these questions often leads to better outcomes.



**Re-evaluate your partnership.** *How do you know when it's time to change the nature of your partnership? What if the community partner wants—or needs—to break up with you?*

When an organization's needs change, or when the political climate shifts, it is important to review the larger goals. Last year, we learned that there would be very few French-speaking refugees resettled in our town. We had to decide whether we would continue to support refugees knowing that our students would have a diminished linguistic experience, or if we should focus instead on collaborating with families who have been here for more than two years and who are no longer supported by the refugee resettlement organization. We opted for the latter, expanding our support to embrace these families' different needs that include educational training and digital literacy.

Following the government's decision to resettle significantly fewer refugees (45,000 in fiscal year 2017, down from 85,000 in fiscal year 2016), our partner agency began to struggle financially, and at the same time, was receiving steady requests to speak about refugee rights. Cognizant that our time might be better spent in other ways, our class decided to take on a more activist role, publishing a series of articles in our local newspaper that highlighted the challenges many refugees face. ([tinyurl.com/y87o6exg](http://tinyurl.com/y87o6exg)).

## Valorizing Language and Cultural Learning

Community-based language learning, despite its many challenges, is a highly effective means for valorizing language learning. My students now view French as a meaningful way to connect with people, rather than as a skill they might use on their next vacation. The connections made through a welcoming “*bonjour*” and the ensuing chitchat in French are small yet powerful mechanisms that help build relationships. The refugee families we meet consistently express surprise and pleasure that our students speak French; many have said that the shared language creates a sense of connection and trust. Even the resettlement agency, which originally

rebuffed my request to place our students exclusively with French-speaking refugees, has come around. They see that having a shared language can make a remarkable difference in establishing shared connection and mutual trust.

I have also witnessed students expand their understanding of Francophone cultures. By eating meals with these families and exchanging personal stories, students gain valuable lived experience that broadens or even contradicts the narrow expressions of Francophone culture presented in many textbooks. Families also enjoy inviting students into their homes and discussing cultural norms. When our students cannot explain certain practices (“Why don't

Americans dance?” or “Why don't American children listen to their parents?”), or when students cannot help decipher government paperwork, the family's questions are validated. This uncertainty also pushes students to reflect on their own culture and the parts of it that they may or may not fully understand.

Involving students in social change-oriented service work is inherently more complex than transactional volunteerism. When it is done in conjunction with a community partner, however, and in the context of a shared mission, it is not only more manageable, it is also far more meaningful.

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## Interested in involving your students?

Check to see if the following resettlement and immigration organizations are active in your community. While many are church-affiliated, their work is non-denominational:

Church World Service  
[www.churchworldservice.org](http://www.churchworldservice.org)

Ethiopian Community Development Council  
[www.ecdcinternational.org](http://www.ecdcinternational.org)

Episcopal Migration Ministries  
[www.episcopalchurch.org/emm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/emm)

Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society  
[www.hias.org](http://www.hias.org)

International Rescue Committee  
[www.theirc.org](http://www.theirc.org)

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service  
[www.lirs.org](http://www.lirs.org)

U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants  
[www.refugees.org](http://www.refugees.org)

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services  
[www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org)

World Relief  
[www.wr.org](http://www.wr.org)

## References

- Reisinger, D. (2014). Across the curriculum and into the community. *The Language Educator*, 9(3), 40-41.
- Reisinger, D. (2017). Issues in global displacement: Exploring community-based language learning. In D. Deardorff and L. Arasaratnam-Smith (Eds.), *Intercultural competence in international higher education* (pp. 249-253). London, UK: Routledge.