International Service Learning: A Critical Guide from an Impassioned Advocate

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What is This?
International Service Learning

A Critical Guide From an Impassioned Advocate

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International service-learning programs burst with potential and stumble with the weight of contradictions left unattended. Without thoughtful preparation, orientation, program development and the encouragement of study, as well as critical analysis and reflection, the programs can easily become small theaters that recreate historic cultural misunderstandings and simplistic stereotypes and replay, on a more intimate scale, the huge disparities in income and opportunity that characterize North–South relations today. Integrated into a well-developed program, international service learning can fulfill its potential as a transformational experience for students informing subsequent study and career choices. This article identifies seven loaded issues in international service learning that, if addressed with creativity and forethought, can provide important opportunities for critical analysis, study, and reflection and in the process bring international programs closer to achieving their transformational potential.

**POTENTIAL AND PITFALLS**

Historically, study-abroad programs on U.S. campuses have been overwhelmingly directed toward European student exchanges. Most international service-learning programs focus instead on building reciprocal relations across the North–South divide. International programs are brimming over with unmet potential, especially in terms of addressing the vacuum in international development education. Yet, they face a host of contradictions that are both similar to and different from those faced by local community service-learning programs. Without thoughtful preparation, orientation, program development and the encouragement of study, and critical analysis and reflection, the programs can easily become small theaters that recreate historic cultural misunderstandings and simplistic stereotypes and replay, on a more intimate scale, the huge disparities in income and opportunity that characterize North–South relations today.

One aim of this article is to excite (with realistic caution) educators about the tremendous potential of service-learning programs to reinvigorate the educational process and create curricula that build bridges between classroom learning and practical responses to urgent social issues. However, we realize that...
potential will only be possible in the course of addressing difficult contradictions and complex issues. The article will discuss both the potential and the pitfalls of international service-learning programs, identify some of the most common difficult issues (which are too often left unaddressed but which can yield great opportunities for critical analysis and reflection), and examine both the grand vision and the deep contradictions that underlie these programs.

International service learning is an organized excursion taken by students (and often faculty or administrators) to different countries or different cultures where students and faculty live with local families and immerse themselves in a culture that is distinct from their own. Students work with local organizations to serve the community where they are staying, engage in a cultural exchange, and learn about a daily reality very different from their own. The roots of international service-learning programs include a variety of movements and organizations advocating experiential education and/or a theological commitment to service. These include the groundbreaking work of the Center for Global Education at Augsburg College in integrating “immersion” language study with the study of social issues in developing countries and the concept of study delegations or travel seminars used by organizations lobbying for change in U.S. foreign policy to educate U.S. citizens and key policy makers on refugee, civil war, and environmental or human rights issues in other countries. The model of building sister-city relationships and the witness-for-peace model also contributed to the development of international service-learning programs. The programmatic work of human rights, religious, and solidarity organizations during the 1980s propelled the development and influenced the structure and orientation of international service-learning programs on many university and college campuses.

There is a huge knowledge gap in international development education that international service-learning programs can motivate faculty members to address. Service learning can transform classroom lessons from abstract discussions (about theories of economic and political development, concepts of citizenship, political participation and participatory democracy, obstacles to democratic transition, the structure and activities of the International Monetary Fund [IMF] and the World Bank, the multiple impacts of the North American Free Trade Agreement and trade liberalization policies, sustainable development models, grassroots social movement organizations, and much more) into real live concepts and issues. Service learning gives students the opportunity to experience a different political system, live with local families in developing countries and visit their factories, fields, schools and work sites, and meet with citizen organizations addressing problems of employment, land tenure, the environment, or the lack of basic public services.

Service-learning experiences often generate profound questions on the part of the students involved. Why are so many people poor? Why is there so much inequality or injustice? Although answers are rarely simple, service learning creates an abundance of teachable moments and prepares students to become
highly motivated seekers of answers. The challenge presented to educators is to create a relevant curriculum that can build on and respond to the potential learning space opened by service-learning experiences. Developing programs and facilitators with the ability to creatively integrate the experiential component with study, reflection, and analysis is a common problem.

**MULTIPLE AND CONFLICTING GOALS**

Built into any service-learning situation is an exciting and potentially explosive multiplicity of goals. The multiplicity of goals are, in part, a result of the multiple groups involved in any international service-learning undertaking: the students, the faculty, in-country government or nongovernmental organization (NGO) sponsors or community partners, and the families and communities where the students are housed. However, there are always multiple and conflicting goals both within and between these different groups.

The students, for example, may be attracted to a service-learning trip out of general yearnings for travel, adventure, and romance or perhaps out of altruistic sentiments, cultural curiosity, or desires to improve language skills, broaden their world perspective, prepare for a career in foreign service or international development organizations, or any combination of these reasons. Faculty members leading the student delegation may have a mix of research, travel, and educational goals and a range of knowledge, contacts, or experience in the country being visited. The ability of the faculty member to facilitate the process of integrating conceptual and experiential learning is critical to the success of the trip.

The communities, agencies, and programs that are the sites of service-learning programs have their own array of objectives for participating. They may hope that a service-learning exchange will heighten the visibility of their organization or program or bring a better image, more votes, a few more tourist dollars, a new network of contacts, the possibility of an exchange program with the U.S. educational institution, or perhaps donations to an important cause. It is also possible that the communities or programs view an important objective of their participation as receiving a service from the university students involved; however, it should not be assumed that this is the most significant aspect of the exchange taking place.

Many studies have been done on the impact of service learning on participating students in terms of improvements in academic performance and increases in tolerance, civic responsibility, and an understanding of social problems (Cohen & Kinsey, 1994, pp. 4-14; Eysenck, 1993; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Marullo, 1998; Smith, 1994; Taylor, 1988; Williams, 1991; among others). Much less analysis has been done on the impact on the collaborating communities, programs, and agencies. Too often, the real educational service being offered is by the community or program that exposes the student to social realities and
developmental and organizational challenges that may be invisible in his or her daily life.

The fact that service learning often means the community or agency is offering the student a service, not vice versa, is not an argument against service-learning programs. Recognizing this reality can help to overcome arrogance, paternalism, or simplistic ideas of charity. It can also generate important new questions and challenges for university service-learning programs as they develop partnerships in the community. University service-learning programs are being challenged to build longer term sustainable relationships with the communities and programs that serve as service-learning sites—relationships that build in reciprocity, respond to community-identified concerns, and concretely address inequities in resources and opportunities.

In addition to the fact that service-learning programs do not always achieve the reciprocal relationships they strive for, international programs also have a tendency to retreat from the harshest inequities of north-south relations. Explanations of histories, structures, and origins of economic and political inequalities are often difficult to do in ways that are neither guilt inducing nor lost in the abstractions of international political economy. Yet, the real power and potential of international service learning is precisely at this juncture—where the experience meets study, critical analysis, and reflection. Below are seven common junctions that can provide important openings for critical analysis, study, and reflection. But if these issues are left unaddressed, service learning can become little more than tourism—and the very privilege of traveling, left unexamined, can imply a passive acceptance of the huge socioeconomic disparities in our world.

NO RETREAT: HOW TO ENCOURAGE CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND REFLECTION
(IN A LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXT)

ATTITUDES TOWARD STREET URCHINS, BEGGARS, AND STREET PEDDLERS

The economic crises exacerbated, in part, by IMF and World Bank macroeconomic and structural adjustment programs (currency devaluations, privatization, cutbacks in government services, subsidies and price supports, etc.) contribute to poverty, desperation, and a mass of street peddlers and beggars in most major Latin American cities. In many cities, beggars and street peddlers (many of whom are children and teenagers) are in constant war with police and other authorities who try to keep them off the street and away from tourists.

Students, unaware and unfamiliar with this situation, may react in a variety of ways. They may feel harassed and irritated by the beggars and street peddlers constantly asking for money or showing their wares, or they may feel saddened
and overwhelmed, particularly by the children in these situations. Students often
debate the merits of giving money, how much to give, and for what it will be
used. All of these reactions are important openings for further discussion. The
question "Why are so many people in this situation?" needs to be answered.
Student attitudes that simplistically blame individuals for their poverty need to
be addressed. Connections should be made between government policies (that
may have been conditions for receiving IMF or World Bank loans) and the
impact of these policies on peasants or workers struggling to make a living.
Many ideas for further student research and investigation can be stimulated by
discussion—for example, further background study on the country's econ-
omic crisis, demystifying the IMF and the World Bank and the impact of their
policies, or interviews with peddlers and street urchins to learn their individual
stories and how they are related to larger policy failures. Are the street peddlers
organized? Are there other organizations addressing their plight? There are
limitless possibilities. The only unacceptable one is to avert our eyes and leave
the issue unaddressed.

GENDER POLITICS:
THE FEMALE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The stereotype of the macho Latin American male has its counterpart in the
stereotype of the liberated American female. Historically, both U.S. and Latin
American males have confused some form of authentic female liberation with
sexual availability. These stereotypes complicate the female student experience
in Latin America. Add to this potent clash of stereotypes the double standard
that exists in both U.S. and Latin American culture (in similar and different
shapes and forms) regarding acceptable behavior for males and acceptable
behavior for females and you have a very explosive brew. The North American
female is highly sought after. She may also be disrespected or demeaned due to
the misunderstanding of liberation and the double standard that pervades all
male-dominated societies. The increasing penetration of U.S. media can also
contribute to unfortunate cultural stereotypes about North American women.

All of these issues are important to discuss in a context that is supportive to
the female student. Discussion of the topic can begin with a simple question
about the female students' experiences with street heckling in their own country.
How have they responded to it? Open and direct discussion of these issues
should be directed toward creating a supportive environment that will be respon-
sive to the special concerns of female students. The success of any intercultural
exchange can be measured, in part, by its success in moving people beyond these
common stereotypes. The female student has distinct challenges in the environ-
ment of Latin American gender politics. Faculty advisors and both male and
female students in the delegation need to be sensitive to these issues.
GENDER POLITICS: THE MALE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The male and female student experiences have in common the possibility of being highly sought after by the opposite sex. They are often viewed as wealthy, powerful, attractive, and successful. In this regard, North American students traveling abroad are in positions of unusual power. Orientation sessions can discuss the following question: How can their power and privilege in this situation be handled responsibly?

Beginning to answer the question requires a more in-depth examination of the reasons why North American students may be so highly sought after by Latin American young people. We have discussed the female experience where media stereotypes of North American women as highly sexualized objects have contributed to unfortunate misunderstandings. The attractiveness of U.S. students to Latin American young people may also be in response to highly constrained job and social opportunities within their own societies. The dream of escaping to "the land of opportunity" by falling in love with the handsome or beautiful stranger is an old but still very powerful motif. What may be an interesting encounter, a fun evening of drink and dancing, or a casual walk along the beach to the young U.S. student could be the beginning of many hopes, fantasies, and dreams to a young Latin American man or woman aspiring to new horizons and economic and social opportunities beyond those his or her small town or struggling country can offer.

Given the unfortunate social attitudes that reward male behaviors of sexual conquest, male students are particularly at risk for engaging in exploitative behaviors in these situations. Although these are not easy topics to discuss, they are important to touch upon prior to the trip. Students need to be sensitive to the possible dynamics in these situations and mature enough not to take advantage of the socioeconomic inequities and cultural misunderstandings that may prevail. In the course of the trip, concrete situations or incidences may provide ample opportunities for in-depth discussion and reflection on these issues.

MONEY MATTERS: FOOD AND ENTERTAINMENT

Service-learning immersion experiences are powerful because students have an opportunity to live daily lives shoulder to shoulder with Latin American families. Latin American families also get intimate glimpses of U.S. students. How should the students and their host families approach the fact that they are living in two different economies (the dollar economy vs. the local currency)?

One of the most common reports students make upon their return is that they unknowingly offended their hosts by having too much money to throw around by local standards. Perhaps students decide to go out for dinner instead of eating at home with their families (spending as much as their host's daughter made that week). Perhaps they decide to go to the local nightclub and invite young people
in the community (not realizing that the entrance fee would be half their weekly salary). Students often comment with delight at how cheap local food, craft items, or clothing might be.

How should these situations be approached? Should students avoid restaurants and nightclubs? Should they invite their host families along and make it clear they (the students) are paying the tab? Would some families feel uncomfortable with this? How much spending money should students bring? Whereas there are no simple answers to these questions, it is helpful if students arrive in the country having thought about and discussed these issues beforehand. Their sensitivities will be heightened, and they will be prepared to discuss such situations as they arise. The daily dilemmas that come from these stark economic inequities are important topics for follow-up reflection, discussion, research, and analysis. These dilemmas can encourage students to further investigate the economic realities in the communities in which they live. What is the average salary? What kind of jobs do people do? Why are so many people unemployed? What are the educational and job opportunities for young people in the community?

MONEY MATTERS: GIVING IT AWAY

There are a variety of economic exchanges involved in immersion service learning. Many immersion programs develop to include charitable giving for specific community programs or needs. This is distinct from the payment made to families for housing and feeding the students. Students may organize fund-raising campaigns for specific groups upon their return to campus or may give donations during the community stay. In all of these exchanges, the clash of the two economies has a complex impact on daily social relations. What are the politics of giving money away, and how can students be responsibly involved in these activities?

Most service-learning programs start from the premise that giving of oneself, giving one’s time, energies, and enthusiasm, and sharing one’s own culture and learning about the culture of others is more significant than making monetary donations. However, North Americans are viewed as having great economic resources, and requests for donations for various causes may be made directly or indirectly to the students. These situations are important topics for discussion, analysis, and reflection. What are the politics of charitable giving? What are the politics of U.S. foreign-aid programs? How can the power of economic privilege be abused? Are most North American students economically privileged? What does that mean? How can economic privilege be used responsibly? These discussions can result in the development of student fund-raising initiatives or ongoing sister-city relationships that make the international service-learning experience much more than a one-time adventure.
THE SUPERPOWER MENTALITY INTERNALIZED

Service-learning immersion programs are usually organized to provide ample time for discussion and cultural exchange between the U.S. students and other school groups, social organizations, families, and communities. The Latin American or Caribbean participants in these cultural exchanges are often just as curious about U.S. life and society as the U.S. students are about the country they are visiting. They also may have their own set of stereotypes or misconceptions about U.S. society such as everyone is comfortably well-off or there are minimal social problems. U.S. students may be placed in the challenging position of needing to accurately represent the complexity of U.S. society and dispel some common stereotypes.

U.S. students, overwhelmed by the development challenges faced by the country they are visiting, may stumble upon their own arrogance during these cultural exchanges unless they have had the benefit of some forethought or discussion. Common mistakes include the following:

- “We don’t have these problems in our country.” This may or may not be true. But certainly the United States faces mammoth social problems. For example, the United States has the highest percentage of its population incarcerated in the world. We also bear responsibility for the manufacturing and marketing of most of the sophisticated weaponry in the world. We certainly have some very profound social problems to address in our country.
- “We can tell you how to solve your problems.” With the best of intentions, U.S. students can fall into the trap of thinking they can solve someone else’s problems—often without understanding the full complexity of the situation.
- “Follow the path or model of the United States to solve your problems.” Because the United States is a world leader and a superpower, many students may assume that the United States is an appropriate and viable model for other countries to emulate. This may or may not be true dependent upon the circumstance. But it certainly should not be assumed without careful examination of the situation.

WHAT IS A GRINGO ANYWAY?

The most commonly told story about the origin of the word gringo is intimately connected with the history of U.S. military interventions in Latin America. North American troops, wearing the green uniform of the military, were told in broken English to go home—“green go” or gringo. A common and interesting experience for U.S. students is to encounter a Latin American young person critical of U.S. foreign policy and its impact on his or her country (either currently or historically). In many of these situations, the U.S. student may be completely ignorant of the policy in question or may be vaguely knowledgeable but had never given much thought to it. In these situations, the Latin American young person is much more knowledgeable of U.S. foreign policy than the U.S. student, not because he or she is smarter or a better student but rather because it
has touched his or her life more directly. The learning on both sides in these exchanges can be substantial, providing that the U.S. student does not feel attacked or become defensive.

Ideally, the student has studied some of the history of the country he or she is traveling in and is aware of important aspects of U.S. foreign policy toward the country. It is important for students to be aware that the word gringo is not derogatory in most contexts. Latin Americans can distinguish between the policies of a government and the perspectives of the citizens.

MORE CONTRADICTIONS, MORE POTENTIAL

There is a fundamental contradiction that underlies the concept of international service learning. Only in countries such as the United States and among the upper and middle classes in these countries could one even conceive of the concept of international service learning—which was once described as “allowing relatively well-off people in this world to travel long distances to experience other people’s misery for a life-enriching experience” (Guo, 1989, p. 108). This brings up an important underlying question: What are international service-learning programs trying to accomplish anyway? Is the goal to provide a life-enriching experience?

Americans, in general, have a reputation for being ethnocentric, ignorant of other cultures, and often suspicious of foreigners. At the same time, we are historically a country of immigrants, and we continue to have a rapidly growing population of immigrants within our midst. The United States has become irrevocably a multicultural society. And national boundaries fade in the wake of technological changes in transportation and communication, ecological crisis and environmental pollution, and increasingly global trade and production patterns—even as the gaps (between and within country) grow between the wealthy and the poor. For all of these reasons, for the hope of a peaceful and stable future, it is crucial to offer young people the learning opportunities of an international and intercultural education.

So, perhaps it is not so much a “life-enriching” but rather a “complacency-shattering” or “soul-searching” experience that international service learning is trying to accomplish. The young student’s impulse to serve, to help, and to extend a hand in solidarity should not be discouraged or belittled. Nevertheless, many students return from international service-learning trips overwhelmed by the economic deprivation they witnessed and frustrated with their inability to really make a difference. This discontent and searching on the part of U.S. students can bring them to a clearer understanding of the fundamental necessity for profound social change. And this, in turn, contributes to a much more solid foundation for global understanding and global action than the original (well-meaning but simplistic) desire to serve.
The exploitative aspect of experiencing poverty for a life-enriching experience is not the only critique of international service-learning programs. Some have argued that the United States' long history of political and economic domination of Latin America and other regions would make an egalitarian cross-cultural exchange impossible due to unconsciously held attitudes of cultural arrogance on the part of U.S. students and due to the profound economic disparities between north and south. Service learning, whether it takes place across borders or across neighborhoods, most often brings together oppressed, marginalized, or underprivileged groups of people with more privileged and economically wealthy young students. This is, indeed, one of the goals of service-learning programs. And so, whether the service-learning experience propels one to enter a new neighborhood or travel thousands of miles to a new country, issues of cultural arrogance, racism, stereotypes, privilege, and economic disparities will have to be discussed. It is my hope that the issues discussed in this article enrich the dialogue on efforts to improve reflection, analysis, and study as a vital component of service-learning experiences.

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