April 2007

Talking Back: Asking Hard Questions about the Impact of International Service Learning

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Available at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol31/iss1/17
Asking Hard Questions about the Impact of International Service Learning

What will we feel? Pity? Sympathy? Guilt?

By Robbin D. Crabtree

In his discussion of education for justice (Conversations, volume 25, spring), Robert Bellah links service learning as an example of an educational approach that may inoculate students with a greater sense of and commitment to the common good. Of course, service learning is not a panacea, but as Bellah further argues, “where it is integrated into actual course work, where it is done together with others, and above all, where it takes place in a context of ongoing reflection about the meaning and value of the work, it can have life-changing consequences.”

Writing about globalization and international education in Conversations a year earlier (volume 24, spring), Dennis Gordon reminds us that international educational programs, like globalization itself, often manifest a mix of stated policies, random actions, and unintended consequences. Thus, he argues, “just as educators must continually ask the hard questions about how overseas programs affect students, the communities where they learn and serve, and the broader society.”

In order to link, continue, and extend conversations begun by Bellah and Gordon, some “hard questions” also need to be asked about international service learning (ISL). In particular, I encourage thoughtful and critical reflection on the nature of our international partnerships, the effects of our presence in developing countries, and the ways these issues affect student learning. While my focus is on service learning in international contexts, many of the issues raised are relevant to domestic programs as well.

The number and range of international education opportunities has grown in recent years. Much of this growth has been in semester and shorter-length programs, many with service components, while full-year abroad participation has been on the decline for at least fifteen years. Many universities offer three-week or shorter ISL opportunities for students who cannot study abroad but are interested in a global education experience. Given increased interest and corresponding proliferation of ISL programs, we must ask: What is their impact on the local communities where we work and the larger development process in the countries where we serve? What impact does ISL have on our students?

The Impact of ISL on Communities and Countries

Often when we work in a local community, we see the tangible manifestations of the immediate material and spiritual help we provide. When building houses or bridges, working in clinics or schools, we feel fairly certain that our presence helps people. Those who were homeless are no longer. Those without medical care are treated. Their gratitude marks the profundity of this contribution.

Our work in global settings helps others, as well. For instance, Nicaraguans tell me they were so impressed by our students’ willingness to try new things (e.g., construction, language, cultural activities) that they, too, develop new courage. I have seen local women use power tools and men give public speeches in their communities for...
How do we ensure that our work does not reproduce a history of dependency?

The first time, our IBL programs can help by providing a catalyst for such community gatherings and for collective work. In Kenya, more than a hundred local people came to help renovate a community well even though there were tools for only fifteen to twenty to work. We passed tools around and those without tools sang songs of encouragement. In El Salvador, community members found willing listeners for their stories of personal and national tragedy from among our visiting students sharing their testimonies was therapeutic. There are countless other stories about how Jesuit colleges and universities help poor and marginalized people in communities around the world through material and technical assistance, simple friendship, and our ability to witness.

Yet, how do we ensure that our work doesn’t reproduce a history of dependency between the U.S. and the developing countries where we visit with our students? The help described above, though personally gratifying to most participants, does not necessarily depart from past colonial and neo-colonial ties between “us” and “them.” Much of our (e.g., U.S. government, Catholic church, etc.) international presence has been posed, at least in public proclamations and policy documents, to help developing countries, to help the poor. However, many examples to the contrary have been documented.

One of the ways IBL programs can try to avoid the pitfalls of large-scale, externally-driven, top-down development is to collaborate with grassroots organizations who can...
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Crabtree: Talking Back: Asking Hard Questions about the Impact of Internati
Published by e-Publications@Marquette, 2007

personal contacts between locals and visitors can lead to misunder-
standings or jealousies, and as the economic impact of our presence
is inevitably felt unevenly in the host county, ISL leaders and our partners
need to be prepared to analyze and manage emergent conflict related
to our presence and our resources.

Even with best practices, in what ways do we risk our service projects
and ISL collaborations substituting—rather than supplementing—local,
national, and international government and business responsibility and
accountability? It is this question that leaves me the most ambivalent as I
continue to teach about globalization in my courses, lead trips for a service
and cross-cultural education, NGO, and work to develop an ISL program
at my current university. As many countries and their smallest, most
remote villages clamor to get some of the affluence and opportunity promot-
ed by globalization optimists, we must take note that funding for and
interest in non-commercial economic structures and projects diminishes.

It is our responsibility to respond to a world in need, but our
efforts must be considered within a much larger, and for the moment
much less promising, global out-
look. It is our responsibility, as Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., has
characterized it, to educate our stu-
dents for solidarity with those most marginalized in the new global order.
But to what extent are we engaging these hard questions as we design
and implement our ISL programs?

The Impact of ISL on Participants

The successful service-learning program addresses both the need to
be of service to others and the need to provide a transformational experience
for our students. Following service-
learning experiences, generally, and

ISL experiences more intensely, partic-
pants often remark that they have
been changed by the experience. But
changed from what to what? What do
colleges think this transformational learning experience is about? Some
reflections on transformation and change at other recent focus groups of
returning ISL participants can be seen on

Table One. These ideas should be seen along a continuum, with the arrow
indication the direction of change: an ISL experience can facilitate as part of
creating "men and women for others" and a "well-educated solidarity". It is
worth considering which of these common outcomes of ISL participa-
tion reveals changes that might actu-
ally be disempowering, and which might reveal a more mutually
empowering transformation for stu-
dents and community members alike.

We need to ask ourselves: After our relatively brief encounter with
the poor, do we feel sympathy for them? Pay for them? Guilt? What kinds of actions do such feelings inspire? Do we respond with charity?
Are our interactions patronizing? How many of our "things" do we leave behind and why? Furthermore, as we consid-
er new aware-
ness of our global rela-
tionship, is (or our disempower-
ment) replaced with
gratitude? How might this gratitude
manifest in envy of us? Dependency
upon us? Are we positioned as the saviors? Does our gratitude (or theirs) foster a continuing sense of superiority on our part or in their view?

Are such feelings signs of mutu-
al disempowerment? If we leave stu-
dents and community members with feelings such as these, are we per-
petuating traditional power relations

Our service often
has unintended
consequences.
between the global north and south? Or, do these feelings merely reflect the first stages of transformation, those related to the sensory and emotional overload so common in ESL, and perhaps an awakening? It is common for students to return from an ESL experience feeling gratitude for what we have and an increased awareness of our privileges as U.S. citizens. Certainly, this is one of our objectives for them. But what if that gratitude were supplemented with a critique of what we have and of the global relations that support our lifestyle? What if we respond with empathy and a growing consciousness of historical and contemporary global relations?

If we foster a sense of responsibility to (rather than guilt about or responsibility for) our partners in the developing world, we may be more likely to develop an advocacy role upon our return, rather than holding the experience as merely a part of our education, albeit a cherished and important part. If we respond with hope and action rather than despair or self-satisfaction, we can turn our experiences into capacity. What if we take that empowerment home and reflect, reason, grow, and advocate? It seems like these outcomes can begin to look like transformation.

Similarly, if in addition to the project's outcomes, community members were able to improve their communication and management skills, as well as gain useful construction, health care, and other skills valuable in other contexts, in response to problems they identify, then we are seeing evidence of Paulo Freire's capacitation. If they sustain the project and build on it with their own initiative, then we can say it is empowering. And if they feel supported, renewed, hopeful, more capable, we might indeed argue that they, too, have been transformed. These, in fact, are all signs of mutual empowerment transformation and should be our goal in international service learning.

If there is one overarching—and very hard—question here, it is as follows: Do our relationships with institutions, communities, and people in global education and service-learning partnerships reproduce or disrupt historical and inequitable power relationships between rich/poor, 1st world/3rd world, urban/rural, educated/not formally educated, etc.? In our answers to this question, we need to consider not only our educational objectives, learning outcomes for our students and the achievement of our universities' missions, but also the empowerment of all participants with the knowledge, skills, motivation, empathy, and passion for justice necessary to transform ourselves and our world.

We must be able to persuasively argue and concretely demonstrate that our programs, though imperfect and ever evolving, are facilitating the co-creation of a more just and equitable world system. To paraphrase Robert Bellah, if our programs are not building solidarity and justice in a globalized world, what good will they do?

Table One: Focus Group Reflections on Transformation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changed from What</th>
<th>to</th>
<th>What</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of 'other'</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Development of respect, trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low global awareness</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Higher global awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vogue sense of disconnection</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Feeling of connection to global others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonconventional, even numbered, routine life</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Emotional presence, emotional intensity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vogue stereotypes about the other</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Service of difference/common humanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelmed</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness/lifestyle</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>More realistic understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chary/briefing</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling entitled</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Happiness in community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term goals (e.g., building houses)</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Service/mutual liberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting to help materially</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Feeling grateful and responsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bystanders</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Long-term structural change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants, perhaps activities</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Wanting to build relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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