Deepening Service Abroad: A Call for Reciprocal Partnerships and Ongoing Support

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Unearth the World

I will always remember feeling frustrated, confused, and empty after participating in an international service project in Thailand in 2013. My project was poorly planned, fellow volunteers and I were unprepared, and I have no idea if there was any lasting impact from my service. I went on to spend 250 days visiting 20 countries and engaging in 4 international service-learning projects during a traveling sabbatical with my husband. Through our 5 projects, we grew to understand many of the promises and pitfalls of global service. We also quickly learned about the differences between international volunteering and global service-learning (GSL). Even though both involve learning while serving with individuals and organizations abroad, GSL, when done well, incorporates reciprocal partnerships and structured reflection. It helps participants gain further understanding of global contexts and develop important life skills. It enhances civic responsibility while also contributing in meaningful ways to local communities and helping to build international relationships.

I returned home from my nine-month journey uncertain of how to sort through my experiences. I had begun the project in Thailand with great intentions but quickly learned that the beautiful aspects of GSL – increased global-mindedness and cultural, social, political, and economic awareness (McBride, Lough, & Sherraden, 2012) – can only be realized with careful planning, reciprocal partnerships, and intentional support before, during, and after the trip. My failed experience catalyzed me to take an interest in the entire field of service-learning and community engagement (SLCE). I decided to tap my energy and discontent to both study the field and improve upon shortcomings of practice by launching a new GSL social enterprise: Unearth the World. As a practitioner and business owner, I do not come to SLCE from an academic point of view. However, I have found it incredibly useful to examine where SLCE has been in order to comment on and contribute to potential improvements and directions for the future.

Zlotkowski’s (1995) piece “Does Service-Learning Have a Future?” is an important contribution to the development of SLCE. In this article, Zlotkowski contends that more attention must be paid to the academic side of SL – the “ways in which community involvement enhances the discipline-specific learning academicians see as central to their professional activities” (p. 9). It appears that many of the suggestions cited in his article have come to fruition as SL in general and GSL in particular have grown rapidly. University faculty and administrators now generally recognize the importance of bringing global perspectives into the undergraduate experience (García & Longo, 2013). And, although only about 1% of all university students study abroad for credit, this number is growing quickly – more than tripling in the past two decades (Institute of International Education, 2011). As the world has become more global and “at a time when 90% of the American public agrees that knowledge about international issues is important to careers of younger generations” (García & Longo, p. 112), GSL appears to be here to stay!

Yet, despite the potentially positive outcomes of GSL, both my personal experience and an extensive body of literature suggest that the list of potential improvements in GSL is seemingly endless (see Hartman in this collection of essays). In fact, I believe if SLCE – especially in the form of GSL – is to fulfill its potential, it is vitally important to focus on two areas for improvement: deepening the role of community partners and improving upon post-trip curricula in order to ensure that transformational learning – making meaning of GSL experiences in ways that contribute to significant changes in worldview – does, in fact, occur.

Deepened Role of Community Partners

During my project in Thailand, I found that the local people had very little say in what the international volunteers did on a daily basis; rather, the volunteers were directed by a Western NGO. I was supposed to be there to assist Thai students in learning English by working with them on their homework; but the project was scheduled by the NGO during the students’ summer vacation, when school was not in session, rendering my presence all but meaningless. I ended up playing games with the children and feeling concerned that I would not be making the level of impact desired by the local community. Potential impact aside, such disregard for the structures and voices of local communities must be changed. There
has been extensive discussion among practitioners and scholars about the need to deepen the role of community members and the reciprocity of partnerships in both international and domestic SLCE (see, for example, Nelson & Klak, 2012). Such a focus could bring more balance to the uneven power and privilege relationships that often exist between GSL students and the communities to which they travel.

Mitch Haddad — the owner of Project Bona Fide, a permaculture design farm in Nicaragua and an Unearth the World community partner — calls for the “focus of international volunteer travel to be about building bridges and deepening relationships within communities around the world, the environment, and ourselves” with special attention to the goals of the local community (personal communication, June 14, 2015). I could not agree more but also assert that one of the best things about GSL — its laser focus on student learning — can sometimes take away from such a focus on communities and international relationships. So, in my mind, the question is: How can GSL programs stay committed to student learning while simultaneously becoming more dedicated to the needs and desires of communities and more nurturing of relationships among individuals and communities around the world?

GSL projects might start with mutually established goals for students, faculty, community members, and others involved in the work. This would be a valuable exercise as part of a GSL curriculum and could go a long way toward aligning the goals, values, and outcomes of a project. Additionally, reciprocal relationships could be strengthened if students worked side-by-side with local leaders and community members to develop both the GSL curriculum and the project itself. As an example of an approach to developing reciprocal partnerships, Unearth the World engages in an intentional and detailed relationship-building process with our community partners, including a partnership questionnaire that gathers information about the needs, interests, and goals of the community and helps evaluate the viability of a partnership. We then have between three and five in-depth conversations (usually over Skype) in order to collaboratively strategize project goals. Finally, to connect personally with community members and ensure an authentic assessment of desired contributions and needed skills, an Unearth the World staff member visits and serves with each organization before forming a partnership. When it has been mutually determined to proceed with a partnership, we co-draft a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that lays out the nature of the relationship, expectations, and commitments. This process is designed to promote positive community impacts and parity rather than contributing to global inequality.

Enhanced Post-Trip Support

In addition to increasing emphasis on mutually beneficial and co-created partnerships, GSL literature has also emphasized the importance of pre-trip student training (Piacitelli, Barwick, Doerr, Porter, & Sumka, 2013). Oftentimes the academic work focuses on critical reflection as the most important mechanism for ensuring that learning takes place. It is widely agreed that students must have structured opportunities to reflect critically on their experiences to maximize academic, civic, and intercultural learning (see, for example, Kiely, 2005 and Bauer, Kniffin, & Priest in this collection of essays).

But many GSL programs fail to include post-trip support — including reflection — that addresses challenges associated with re-entry and capitalizes on opportunities to bridge the international experience to students’ daily lives back at home. Longitudinal research confirms that participation in GSL programs causes many students to experience significant dissonance and intense moral, political, cultural, personal, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual transformations in their worldview (Kiely, Kiely, & Hartman, 2005). This upheaval can have serious implications for students, including difficulties communicating with family and friends and sometimes even completely rejecting previously held beliefs or struggling to fit back into their “normal lives” — a dynamic that Kiely (2004) describes as a “chameleon complex.” I remember shedding tears the first time I entered an American grocery store after my nine months abroad; something about the abundance of fresh and well-lit food was difficult to handle. I have spoken to countless students and travelers who experience similar challenges re-entering their home communities. Students have often expressed to me that it is easier to simply not talk about their GSL experience because their friends and families “don’t get it.” Unfortunately, this internalization can be harmful, potentially causing long-term inner turmoil and uncertainty. Returning travelers are often unprepared and unequipped to deal with their evolving global consciousness; and I have personally seen this lead to discontent and feelings of isolation and depression.

Given the intensity of GSL and the importance of post-trip reflection in helping students act upon their new global consciousness, one might assume that post-trip re-entry support is prioritized in GSL curricula. Unfortunately, however, it is actually very common for post-trip curricula to be light or nonexistent (Kiely et al., 2005). Even though post-trip reflection and support appears to be the most important step toward crystallizing and sustaining learning, I have found it to be the most neglected. This gap in the process begs the question: What good is a per-
fectly executed GSL course (or GSL experience through a third party) if the mix of enthusiasm and turmoil students undergo is not converted into sustained learning? I would argue that even if every aspect of a GSL program – detailed orientation, strong community partnerships, useful service, structured reflection – is flawlessly executed, it could all be rendered meaningless and even harmful if students are not able to incorporate their new questions and perspective transformations into their day-to-day lives back home.

How might we go about filling this void? I believe the key is to consistently build post-trip reflection opportunities into GSL curricula from the onset of course or program planning. It is not enough to simply encourage voluntary, individual post-trip reflection. Rather it must be routinely included in syllabi and other descriptions of trip-related components and expectations. For instance, could educators mandate that the international travel be positioned in the middle of a GSL course to enable intentional use of post-trip class time? Or, might there be a required one-credit post-trip course that incorporates guidance on re-entry? Alternatively, I could envision creating an interconnected community of students who have engaged in intensive GSL in which they network with and support each other using virtual means, helping to reduce feelings of isolation.

Travelers need to be forewarned about the likelihood of feeling a level of discomfort after returning home from their GSL experience, and structured re-entry support needs to be incorporated into GSL programs. As an example, Unearth the World provides participants with a packet that includes information and strategies for personal and emotional re-entry, opportunities for critical reflection, and specific suggestions for continuing their civic engagement, professional development, and social action. We have learned the value of post-trip coaching (e.g., by phone) that guides participants in developing action plans to integrate their learning into their post-program lives in a meaningful way. It has been documented that students greatly benefit from this type of exercise (Kiely et al., 2005), and I encourage colleagues who set up and facilitate GSL programs to continue developing and sharing such activities.

I have found that GSL participants envision a variety of ways to integrate their international experience into their daily lives. Some begin or continue to engage in service locally, while others want to stay connected to the international community. Still others find it useful to incorporate their GSL experience into the workplace. Caitlin – an elementary school teacher who spent time working with a school in Ghana – credits the post-project support she received from us and the creation of a Service Action Plan as the reason she has been able to adjust so fluidly back into her own family and community. Caitlin said, “I have been able to teach my students about children in Ghana and I am able to demonstrate the importance of everything we have here in the U.S. and how fortunate we are” (personal communication, June 14, 2015). Caitlin has even organized a fundraiser at her local school to raise money for the nonprofit with which she worked. While this is a small instance of post-trip reflection and action, it can serve as an example of the potential of a more vigorous and intentional post-program component in GSL experiences.

Where Do We Go from Here?

GSL has come a long way in the 20 years since Zlotkowski (1995) called for the curricular integration of SL. Such growth is important for the evolution of the field, but we must not stop here. This essay is intended to highlight the need for more meaningful and reciprocal global experiences across the board – whether in a university-run GSL program, a service trip through a third party provider, or a solo international SLCE project. Great care must be taken to ensure the focus on student learning before and after their GSL experience does not preclude a comparable emphasis on reciprocal community engagement and intentional post-trip learning and support.

The continued growth and success of GSL depends largely on how students, community members, instructors, and others who help design and deliver GSL experiences commit to deepen partnerships and improve post-trip support through the incorporation of ongoing critical reflection. My own experience suggests GSL students and their future work with communities can benefit from critiquing their experiences and entering the broader conversation about the future of SLCE. Through such critical practice we can ensure that meaningful GSL becomes the standard for the field and truly generates the positive change we seek with students and in the world.

References


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KATHRYN PISCO (kathryn.pisco@gmail.com) is a social entrepreneur from Chicago with a passion for travel and giving back. After graduating from Cornell University, she spent years working in sales for large corporations. In 2014, she founded a social venture called Unearth the World (www.unearththeworld.com) after her own transformative international experience. Unearth the World’s mission is to promote cross-cultural learning, foster reciprocal partnerships, and elevate social consciousness through responsible volunteer exchange programs.