

Avoiding the Missionary Tendency



For service learning in education abroad to gain esteem and recognition parity within the wider academic world and beyond, the question of academic content rather than social good must be addressed.

By Michael Woolf

SERVICE LEARNING, AT HOME AND ABROAD, is gaining in popularity and few would disagree that this is a welcome development. That said, until the academic objectives of international education, in general, and service learning, in particular, are more precisely defined, there is little hope that the broader academic world will buy into and support these practices. Definitions need to go beyond worthy but vaguely humanitarian and idealistic notions of empathy between nations and cultures. Ill-prepared attempts to merge service learning into the international education curriculum may risk the broader credibility of both endeavors. Why? In this case there may simply be too much of a “good thing.”

Doing Good Things

Let us begin with the basic premise that international education is perceived and promoted by those in the field as an inherent good: it promotes mutual understanding among cultures, which is a step in the right direction toward attaining some, usually imprecise, notion of “peace.” This too simple and basic rationale has not been enough to convince many of those outside the field of the implicit

value; educators and administrators alike have had to shift emphases and promote international education as a mechanism for creating smarter and wiser citizens capable of succeeding in the science-, technology-, and business-oriented world of the twenty-first century. In short, good intentions are not enough on their own; there have to be concrete and practical outcomes. So, when the notion of service is added to the mix despite the obvious “goodness” of the

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service—the desire to volunteer and to contribute to social development abroad—the package has a softer center and, thus, becomes a harder sell. The practical application of service learning in the international educational context has not yet been clearly enough articulated or defined. It is just not enough to have fervor: the wide-eyed enthusiasm of the missionary determined to bring light to the lives of the poor benighted foreigners. Given notions of manifest destiny in the United States and the uncritical (but deeply suspect) sense that the United States is the repository of democratic ideals, the potential for unwelcome intrusion into host communities (the missionary tendency) is apparent.

Service Learning

It is fair to say that there is a widespread and growing interest in service learning in the United States both as an enhancement to domestic programs and as an aspect of education abroad programs. Service learning has been defined as an academic program based on “engagement with underserved groups or organizations and projects focused on issues of the common good; structured reflections on service-related and discipline-specific concerns; and respect for the needs and interests of the community partner.”¹ Other definitions have stressed the importance of the creation of a new kind of pedagogy or an ethical ideology or, indeed, as a tool out of which educational reforms can be constructed.²

However service learning is defined, it contains a set of potential complications that needs to be addressed. For example, in the United States, service learning is now an accepted pedagogy even if it remains at the margins of the curriculum in most colleges and universities.³ In short, the status of service learning is problematic institutionally and academically. It is frequently not located in mainstream academic departments (or is seen as an incidental activity), nor does it, for the most part, achieve esteem parity with more traditional academic approaches. At the heart of this dilemma is the fact that service learning is “often little more than just institutional community service.”⁴

Clearly, no member of a civil society can object to “service”: time freely given to support projects aimed at achieving social good. That is what countless charities and not-for-profit agencies exist to do, but what does that have to do with universities? The objectives of universities are complex and, sometimes, contro-

versial as discussions of the commodification of education make clear. Are universities big businesses or agencies for social good? Can they be both? Service learning activity also raises the question of what distinguishes the function of a university from the function of a social agency. That question cuts to the heart of the dilemma facing proponents of service learning: there can be no objection to doing good things but, if that is the priority, it may not properly belong within the academic environment except as a peripheral social activity in which students may be encouraged to participate as part of their “training” for citizenship. To prove the academic value of service learning, we must be able to demonstrate that the topic is best studied through some form of service or, at least, that service is a serious enhancement to the process of academic understanding.

If the function of a university is no longer the subject of comfortable consensus, it must still be possible to assert that universities are, in one way or another and to some degree or another, about learning things. However cynically or ironically we approach the daily realities of academia, that assertion must surely be a minimum point of accord. To be a university (as distinct from a social agency or a General Motors, for example) it is necessary to have some strategy that involves teaching, learning, and researching. The concern here is to consider the problem inherent in service learning where the repeated emphases are on “service” and not enough is focused on “learning.” In short, students may well become better citizens but what have they learned? Further, how can that “learning” be defined in terms that are understood and accepted beyond the community of the convinced? For service learning to gain esteem and recognition parity within the wider academic world and beyond, there is a need to refocus the way in which the activity is presented, defined, and located. In essence, this form of education needs to be structured and presented in a manner that makes it clearly a proper and appropriate activity for a university rather than solely the proper provenance of a social welfare agency or church.

In almost all of the debates and presentations in the field, the emphasis is on service: contribution to the host community, the creation of a consciousness of the civil society through participation, and strengthening the interaction between academia and the world outside. A clear institutional commitment to service learning is certainly intended to eradicate or at least reduce the perceived hostility between

town (the world elsewhere) and gown (hallowed and privileged halls of academe). These are noble aspirations, and even the most cynical among us will recognize that these are good aims and that they enhance the mission of universities and organizations around the world.

Furthermore, the idea of service speaks to the idealism of youth: to the wholly creditable desire of the young to contribute positively to activities that are seen to be socially progressive. In that respect, the motivation is similar to that which drove the Peace Corps and to that which inspires young people around the world to volunteer to participate in countless schemes aimed at social improvement.

In this respect, service learning at home or abroad brings into happy coexistence the idealism of the young with institutional commitment to social improvement in the given community whether it be the homeless in Washington, D.C., the rural poor in Ghana, or abused women in London. Those of us who work in the field do so (sometimes) with a missionary enthusiasm for the fact that we have wonderful students trying to be part of community projects that are committed to social good. This leads toward a warm sense of righteousness. We feel good about ourselves, which is a pleasant change from the customary levels of anxious neuroses and pathological sense of self-doubt that is the normal state of affairs in academia.

Talking About International Education

This issue is further complicated when we consider the development of service learning within the context of education abroad. In the context of international education in general, learning outcomes are traditionally described in relatively broad and inexact terms: global competence, cross-cultural communication, enhancing mutual understanding, personal growth, and so on. Those of us in international education subscribe heartily to these notions and are driven by the mission inherent in our activity. We are (rightly) convinced that education abroad, for the most part, is a crucial and critical activity in the world where the interdependence—for good and ill—of nations is part of current global reality.

A widely perceived benefit of education abroad is that, in some way or another, despite the difficulties in defining the “how” aspect, education abroad enhances mutual understanding between cultures. We also know that education abroad has grown. The Erasmus/Socrates programs in Europe, for example, have during the last 10 years created international opportunities for more than 1 million participants. During the next 10 years, the object is to increase that number by 300 percent. In Japan, they have at last reached Prime Minister Nakasone’s target of bringing in 100,000 overseas students per year by 2000.⁵ In the United States, *Open Doors* indicates a year-on-year growth in the numbers of U.S. students studying abroad.

If what we have repeatedly told each other is true, a simple equation should indicate that, as education abroad numbers grow, mutual understanding between nations and cultures will increase and, therefore, the world will become more tolerant of its diversi-

ties. This, of course, is not true. A swift look at, admittedly, highly selected statistics shows another perspective: 155,000 U.S. students are estimated to have studied abroad in 2002. The number of new refugees in the same period was 293,000.⁶ Crudely stated, there were far more involuntary travellers in 2002 than there were U.S. students voluntarily studying abroad. The gap between the privileged and the dispossessed grows wider while the ranks of the dispossessed inexorably grow. Of course this is a comparison that is somewhat forced, but it helps expose a key weakness in the way in which we still argue for education abroad. We may believe that our activities create enhanced understanding, but we believe this in the face of most of the hard evidence. In fact, the growth of international education in this century has made no discernible difference in the level of conflict across our globe. Our century has been marked, so far, by conflict between cultures (Islam and the West, in particular), more refugees, discord rather than accord, while, simultaneously, study abroad numbers have grown.

That is not to say that we are wrong in promoting international education in the ways in which we do. Cross-cultural understanding is a highly significant objective. We might well argue that without increased international education the situation would be even worse. Broadly, within our profession we can share these ideals in a

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relatively untroubled manner, but they will no longer do in the wider world as a whole and in the academic environment in particular.

What we need to do is to change the terms of the debate. In education abroad, we need to be able to state precisely what the learning outcomes are to be in a given experience, and that statement needs to be credible to colleagues in academic departments and to university administrators. In some cases this is relatively simple: we can probably demonstrate that students who study Spanish in Spain will become more confident language users than those who do not. We need to do this, though, more systematically, for example, for study abroad in English-speaking countries, internships abroad, and, in the context of this argument, service learning abroad.

Learning, Not Service

If service learning is to gain and retain academic credibility, it has primarily to address the question of academic content rather than social good. To achieve real status as a model of learning and a field of inquiry, the emphasis has to shift from service to learning. Thus, the object of service learning cannot be to do good though good may well be done. The intent has to be to satisfy key academic objectives that, internationally, have to relate to enhancing understanding of another culture through a combination of theory and participation. But those objectives also clearly have to go further and be expressed in concrete terms that make sense in academia. The emphasis has to be on theory rather than participation, or, at least, the integration of theory with participation, if the program is to secure any kind of academic credibility.

The role of educators in the field has to be, therefore, to concretely and precisely define learning objectives. The issue becomes further complicated when the topic is the development of international service learning. Study abroad has, on its own, problems in defining academic objectives in precise ways that go beyond the vaguely humanitarian, vaguely idealistic notions of empathy between nations and cultures. When the notion of service is added to this liberal mix, the melange becomes softer yet and threatens to sag beneath the weight of do-goodism.

The solution is to shift emphasis from service to learning through a highly demanding curriculum in which social policy, history, and cultural realities (theory and practice) are taught alongside placements in organizations committed to social good. The aca-

ademic content and outcome become necessary preconditions for the service. Evaluation focuses on what is learned by the student, not on their contribution to the organization in which they are placed. The more rigorous practice of colleagues in the internship field yields many effective models for this kind of systematic academic oversight.

What international educators need to demonstrate is that the topic is best studied through a combination of theory and participation. Learning is, given this emphasis, enhanced through service. Service is a tool through which the academic area is illuminated. In this respect, it is analogous to the textbook and the essay: part of the plethora of mechanisms by which we seek to educate and enlighten. There is no implied critique of service for its own sake. Indeed, we have an obligation to encourage our students to become part of their wider communities, but it is imperative, I believe, to distinguish wholly creditable volunteerism (where much may be learned incidentally) from service learning (where learning is formal, structured, evaluated, and reflected upon).

One clear implication for the university is that service learning needs to be institutionally located within academic departments and not within student services or religious associations. The distinction between volunteerism and service learning is not just a matter of course content but is, crucially, a matter of institutional commitment. Without the academic environment, the activity remains peripheral to the purposes of a university.

There is also an obligation to look more closely at the impact of students on social agencies and their clients. This is an area where further investigation and substantive research is necessary. The benefits to agencies and their clients may be sporadic, and there may be practical and ethical implications that have not been in the forefront of current debates. As Tonkin and Quiroga argue, "Service learning programs designed simply to educate students and not, at the same time, to maximize the effectiveness of service to the populations in question, raise serious ethical questions (questions in our opinion insufficiently addressed in the U.S. context)."⁷

From whatever perspective we approach the growth of service learning in either a domestic or international perspective, we encounter a set of complexities. The activity involves agencies external to the usual academic environment, and the impact on the work of those agencies may be problematic. Within

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the university, service learning may be marginalized both institutionally and academically. The arguments for the value of service learning are frequently made in nonacademic terms, enforcing the sense in traditional academia that, while this is a “good thing,” it may be of peripheral interest. As a consequence, the emphasis on service (rather than learning) undermines the credibility of the activity and creates a soft-centered rationale that simply is not good enough.

For example, The Foundation for International Education (FIE)’s work in service learning in London has tried to counter this tendency by defining academic outcomes as precisely as possible and by making these the primary rationale for what FIE does. At FIE, we have defined learning objectives in terms of acquiring knowledge of comparative U.S.-UK social history, understanding the role of public and private sector agencies, exploring issues in social policy, financing and managing community-based projects, and social and political structures in another national context. Participating students will gain in other ways: they will mature, they will learn that not everything that is taken as true in the United States is necessarily seen as so in other cultures, they will confront their own stereotypes and see other realities in a less simplistic manner, and so on. To put it rather flippantly, though, we try to keep quiet about all that stuff because we want to make the hard case for service learning abroad in particular, and international education in general.

A Position Worth Taking?

The case for international education needs to be made in terms of specific educational benefits of studying a discipline or topic in another national context. The more general and compelling case for study abroad is a part of the international educational community’s general mission, of course, but it must only be the environment from which we make specific academic objectives clear. This cannot be done in a broad manner but must be done on a case-by-case basis with faculty input.

The consequences of this view for service learning abroad, in particular, are that service learning placements without serious academic context or output should not be given academic credit. Furthermore, the university needs to make a commitment to service learning by locating the activity within an academic department, not within student services or some religious context. In this sense, there needs to be a rigorous understanding of the distinction between service learning and volunteerism. Without that distinction, service learning will remain a marginal activity related only peripherally to the core functions of university education. Without such

an academic content and context, service learning itself will never gain esteem parity with other academic courses whether taught at home or abroad.

Service learning abroad contains within it an enormous potential to create a holistic and integrated academic program for participants wherein there is direct correlation between what is experienced and what is learned theoretically and by participation: in short, to embody John Dewey’s assertion that “there is an intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and education.”⁸ Without theoretical underpinning, the totality will be justly seen as academically suspect—an easy option that we should be very uneasy about defending.

We need especially to get away from the emphasis on “service” and get to grips with “learning.” By this mechanism we will avoid the danger inherent in the missionary tendency. **IE**

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Endnotes

1. Edward Zlotkowski, “Mapping New Terrain; Service-Learning Across the Disciplines,” *Change*, January-February 2001, American Association for Higher Education: Washington, D.C., pp. 24-33.
2. A succinct summary can be found in a publication of The National Society for Experiential Education: *The Role of Service Learning in Educational Reform*, by Robert Bhaerman, Karin Cordell, and Barbara Gomez (Simon and Schuster, Needham Heights, 1998), pp. 4-6.
3. Humphrey Tonkin and Diego Quiroga, “A Qualitative Approach to the Assessment of International Service-Learning,” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, v. x., Fall 2004, p. 132.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
5. By 2000, only about 60,000 foreign students were studying in Japanese universities. The target was achieved in 2003 but brought with it a substantial number of problems: 65 percent of the incoming students are from China and that this has led to a national imbalance in some institutions. There is, in addition, a growing perception that the Chinese students do not intend to return to China and are the source of some perceived “social problems.” In short, from a government perspective the achievement of Nakasone’s target has been a very mixed blessing.
6. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has a category it calls “people of concern”: populations at risk of security who have been displaced from their homes or who are in danger of being so. At the beginning of 2002, the estimated number of people in this category was circa 19,800,000. By the beginning of 2003 the figure had grown to more than 20,550,000. That is 1 in 300 of the entire world’s population. Roughly 155,000 U.S. students are estimated to have studied abroad in 2002. The number of new refugees in the same period was 293,000.
7. Tonkin and Quiroga, p. 132.
8. John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, Collier Macmillan, New York, 1938, pp. 19-20.