



Reimagining Service Learning and International Travel

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A recent article says this: “. . . the concept of service learning is outdated.” Now here’s the context.

The article was referencing service learning when used “to describe volunteer programs and international volunteer travel emphasizing learning through service—service that teaches life lessons that help the traveler and the world.” The article, [From Service Learning to Learning Service \(http://shar.es/T7gQE\)](http://shar.es/T7gQE), continues to describe the multiple benefits of international travel to “help people gain experience, perspectives, and skills that can help them improve the world.” The authors, Claire Bennett and Daniela Papi, then suggest changing the term to “learning service.”

If we are discussing international travel to accomplish improving the world, I would edit the line instead to be this:

In the world of volunteer programs and international travel, the term service learning has been most often used inappropriately.

So in my opinion, it’s not really about being outdated, the term most often doesn’t fit this context. The typical international volunteering excursion is not engaging in a true high quality service learning model.

During high school, my daughter used money she earned to go on a summer international service trip with a reputable organization. Because she wanted to also learn French, she chose going to Guadeloupe for a month for a combination of home stay for language immersion, travel and service learning (as it was billed). On one of her rare calls she was pretty upset. “Mom, this isn’t service learning, it’s hardly community service. They just find something for us to do but I can tell it’s makeshift and not really necessary.” They painted a school that had a modest need for a coat of paint and cleaned up a beach. When I contacted the host organization, they owned up. The service add was mainly for marketing (helps with college applications) and they hoped to develop more significant opportunities in the future. Indeed some of their destinations may have had more service learning-like experiences; however, I doubted the quality and again the use of the term.

Across the globe, I find schools rethinking this model of school or youth groups parachuting in to a locale with the idea that in a day- or week-long experience significant help or answers to embedded chronic community needs can be met. At best they may make a modest contribution, and usually only if local networks who truly know the needs allow them to participate. Even organizations that work tirelessly with exceptional resources struggle to help

people who are at risk of, for example, malaria; the nets provided for bedding are sometimes used for fishing when the need for food surpasses the fear of disease. School supplies brought to remote villages along with computers are often found six months later in a closet long after the “do-gooders” have returned home satisfied with their contribution.

Bennett and Papi seem to agree when they write, “The reality is that designing an intervention whereby young and inexperienced volunteers effectively and sustainably ‘help’ a community overseas—one that speaks a different language and has different cultural assumptions—is extremely difficult. It is also very difficult to manufacture opportunities at scale where the volunteers’ impact on the ground significantly offsets the resources and time it takes to manage them.”

Let me be clear. There are some of these trips for students that are remarkable. I have heard of a sustained relationship over years with students going to the Kalahari that is well-designed and generates meaningful developments to respond to verified local needs with local partners. Key words here are *sustained relationship*, *well-designed* and *local partners*. You may have an exemplary story to tell and I honor this. Of course there is much done and accomplished with sustained ongoing reciprocal relationships built on meaningful interactions based on local learning. Some of this is generated in a K-12 or university setting based on the principles and best practices of service learning and this is laudable.

However, when involving students as the travelers, I concur with the authors of this article in describing how international service travel or trips must be primarily about the learning. They write, “Organizations sell the vision of a volunteer disembarking from a plane saying, ‘Hi, I’m here to help you!’ but we believe the message needs to be ‘Hi, I’m here to learn from you about how I can help—now or in the future.’ This shift means seeing these travelers not as ‘volunteers’ serving local ‘beneficiaries,’ but rather as humble foreign visitors who are looking to learn from local people to understand context, culture, and history that they can use to valuably contribute—either during their trip or after they return.” There is much to learn. And there are partnerships to build with the local community, because they are the most knowledgeable about their situations and circumstances. When built on knowledge and mutual respect, then the doors can open for engaged response that may include collaborative service.

When visitors arrive with their own singular nationalistic perspectives and with limited preparation, much is missed. They may receive a polite reception and even think their actions are impactful, however this may not be the reality at all. When I learned of a group of well-meaning students heading into a small village in China to work with an NGO promoting western health care practices, I asked whether the preparation included learning about traditional

Chinese medicine. Knowing and honoring local wisdom and traditions is a critical foundation for international experiences. The teachers quickly understood and together we began what would be a longer conversation on rethinking and reconsidering what the purpose of these trips might be: learning. Learning that can lead to informed and mutually beneficial action.

With many schools, I have assisted in reframing what is known in some settings as a “Week Without Walls” where students travel to a different country or distant part of their own country for an immersion in culture, adventure and service. In the Five Stages of Service Learning, the first stage is *investigation*, the finding out that, when done well, leads to the emergence of a verifiable need. Many of these trips can be that: *investigation*—a deep inquiry into understanding what has occurred and what is occurring and what is likely to occur with the status quo remaining in place. This can be done through action research, using media, interviews, surveys, and observation and experiences. The investigation and inquiry can begin before the students depart and continue in more in-depth ways on the ground. Some of what is done through investigation may lead to and even *look* like service, for example, if the community agrees they need a building painted, students can participate along with the community. However this represents a minor element of service in comparison to the enormous possibilities of learning. In many cases it’s the travelers who are the greatest recipients of what we might call the generosity of the host community, who welcome them, share meals, and introduce their culture and their concerns. The host community makes themselves available to engage in experiences and learning that especially benefits the visitor. Whose life is actually changed?

Service learning by the way is alive, well and thriving in many parts of the world. It may go by different names across the globe, however I still see service learning as a thriving education pedagogy that engages youth in applying classroom knowledge and content to meet or assist with authentic community need. Among the many net results are youth who are knowledgeable, willing and eager participants in our social fabric, who develop the skills and capacity to continue learning, always learning, before taking action. They have the ideas, energy and enthusiasm and the heart for service. With guiding educators who understand and value the process, this is a win-win.

One more recommendation. Before packing for a far away locale, see if you can put the same intention, initiative and *learning* into your own backyard. We must be cautionary, that service and learning in any form can become an aim for the exotic and in so doing we sometimes miss what is around the corner. A colleague recently expressed concern, stating that some schools prefer to take a week going 600 kilometers away where they can “do good” for children, for example, by helping a remote school. “This may feel safer than a sustained relationship with a

poor school located four blocks away,” she said. My suggestion is that in all cases where the aim is to learn and or serve globally, find the local equivalent to develop sustained and purposeful partnerships where we live day to day. With our world shrinking, we may find the world and a world full of needs just outside our door.

The good news is we can continue to wrestle with these ideas. Your thoughts always welcome. Email me at cathy@cbkassociates.com.

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