

# Sharing the World: Using Study Abroad to Enhance an On-Campus Service-Learning Project

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*The purpose of this paper is to illustrate use of a study abroad opportunity to support a service-learning experience. The study abroad component was a semester-long, multiple-country program in Central America and the service-learning project was an afterschool program for rural elementary and middle school students. Combining the two resulted in the opportunity to use the study abroad experience as a platform to share with the students the culture and issues facing others in the global community.*

The present paper describes a project that was developed between a student and a faculty member at a two-year women's liberal arts college with enrollment of around 350. The project was conceptualized as the student was preparing to embark on a study abroad experience to Central America. The student had spent two semesters involved in campus-based service-learning as a co-leader and then leader of an afterschool program focused on developing cross-cultural perspectives in local elementary and middle school students. The children who participated in the program were from two nearby rural school districts in Vernon County, Missouri. This region has high childhood poverty rates at, according to the most recent census report, 30.8% (compared to the state average of 18.9%) though there was certainly diversity in socioeconomic backgrounds within the group of children who participated (<http://mcdc2.missouri.edu/webrpts/cntypage/29217.html>). One school group brought three to five children on their meeting days, while

the other brought between fifteen and twenty-five children. The project was born out of a desire to find a way to use the experiences abroad to enhance the existing afterschool program for these children.

One of the biggest challenges of the afterschool program was to develop programming that was truly representative of the countries and cultures it aimed to present. The previous model of creating a lesson plan on some aspect of a country's culture each week was incredibly limited in its ability to foster a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives as there was no real reasoning behind the choosing of each country. Due to this challenge, the main goal of this project was to create a more in-depth and focused afterschool meeting model to learn about the region of Central America. This was done by focusing on the region (rather than particular countries) visited during the study abroad experience as a whole throughout the semester-long project, then narrowing in on a particular aspect of the region during each meeting and discussing the similarities and differences within each country.

The final title of the project was "Exploring Central America." It provided a semester-long activity- and discussion-based learning experience for the afterschool program children to learn about Central America. Each meeting provided factual information and interesting activities designed to foster creativity while highlighting different aspects of Central American history, culture, geography, and language. The format of each lesson plan included: background information for college student mentors (who had not had the abroad experience) on the topic to be covered, an "order of activities" with details for each, learning objectives for the participants (both volunteers and children), assessment activities, and other details required for preparing the lesson. This lesson plan allowed the mentors to have some understanding of the region prior to assisting with the children. There were still limitations to the depth and scope of the lessons due to time and space constraints, but the new emphasis on the regional diversity and offering information based on real experiences improved the learning experience.

## IMPLEMENTATION

A typical meeting for the "Exploring Central America" program went in the following order: introductions and question of the day, a PowerPoint or slideshow of pictures or facts, activities expanding on the topic of the day, and then wrap-up and assessment question(s). The purpose of the introduction and "question of the day" was to ensure that all participants were engaged from the moment that they entered the classroom, creating a space where all voices could and would be heard and respected. This question was generally related to the topic of the meeting and was answered by every child in the room. Following that, we had a short slide show typically including many pictures taken while abroad and gathered from the internet to visually represent the topic for the week. Once the basic information was presented and questions were answered, the activities which built on this information would take place. These activities included discussions of the cultural differences between the United States and Central America, whether formally or informally planned. At the end of each meeting we would have a time to review the main points of the meeting's topic and respond to assessment questions (usually orally) to ensure that the objectives were met.

This style of meeting was influenced by the praxis of informal education made popular by Freire (1970). It utilizes dialogical approach to immerse the students in a conversation about the cultural realities and information of Central America as a means to challenge preconceptions or introduce our often ignored neighboring countries. The obstacles of space, time, and varied developmental stages made it difficult to achieve the level of engagement we strove toward (Angotti, Doble, & Horrigan, 2011). However, this particular project did allow us to delve into an active conversation with children about the realities of life in Central America. We were working with children in the elementary and middle school age range to learn about topics that were often challenging to address in an age appropriate manner. Due to the ages and subject matter, our emphasis on dialogue and engagement was, at times, more heavily planned and contrived than Freire would have perhaps suggested as the ideal. The goal however, was to provide genuine knowledge of the region and encourage further inquiry, thus encouraging participation and enhancement of the global community. Despite the age group and time limitations, this project was frequently able to achieve its objective of creating an environment which fostered meaningful conversations and inquiry.

All of these lesson plans were compiled in a volunteer handbook distributed to the four college student volunteers in the program at the first volunteer meeting. This handbook also included a brief history

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of the afterschool program, goals for students from the local school districts and for volunteers, and a description of service-learning taken from the college's *Faculty Service Learning Handbook*. The purpose of the final element, the description of service-learning, was to assist the participating student from the college in understanding the essential pedagogy of service-learning, which is integrating the "real world with the academic world" (Rimmerman, 2009, p.24). Three of the four volunteers were interested in careers in social work or teaching, so this experience provided them with an "opportunity for developing relevant and meaningful ways to learn about abstract and often challenging concepts," a benefit Farber (2011) discusses in *Changing the World with Service Learning*. The volunteers were able to have frequent encounters with children from rural Missouri schools, which provided them the context to support prior and future study of child development and teaching and learning styles. All of the elements of the handbook were combined in a single document along with contact information and a calendar, which helped facilitate the maintenance of organization and consistency throughout the semester.

#### CONNECTION BETWEEN SERVICE-LEARNING AND STUDY ABROAD

The value of service-learning and importance of study abroad in higher education has been often discussed in academia; however, very little has been written on the connections between the two separate entities. The connection usually described is related to doing service-learning projects abroad (Parker & Dautoff, 2007). Another relevant connection that is less often covered is service-learning upon return from study abroad that essentially shares those first hand experiences with the local community. Using the interest, passion, and knowledge of different parts of the world gained during a study abroad experience can be a valuable way to give back to the community.

The unique nature of the study abroad experience which the student participated in was especially conducive to the development of this project. This particular study abroad trip traveled to many locations (rural villages, capitals, etc.) within Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua in an experience-based program focused on social change. As a routine part of the coursework, students on the trip were introduced to many influential people of each of these countries throughout the semester who spoke on the issues being studied. These people came from a variety of backgrounds and viewpoints so as not to be biased to one side of an issue or another. For example, when in Nicaragua studying history of the region (particularly, the Sandinista Revolution) students met with a Sandinista leader from the conflict for one class

period and a Contra leader for the next. In addition, a variety of other speakers from local organizations shared their experiences and thoughts on that period of Nicaraguan history and how it has played into the current political system. This type of meeting was just one of countless examples of how the trip provided diverse perspectives and fostered an understanding of the different regions visited beyond the picturesque scenery.

When planning activities for the afterschool program, the plethora of experiences made it difficult to choose which aspects of the regional culture to attempt to present to the children. How does one even attempt to convey the diversity and richness of an entire region in a mere two-hour meeting several times a month? The student aimed to represent different topics which could be easily introduced and understood by the children in the group and which best utilized her own experiences and conversations with people she met while abroad. There was frequent encouragement for the children to continue to have an open mind and interest in learning beyond what could be presented in the time frame. Often, the children would come up with questions during the wrap-up period of the meetings and expressed a desire to travel to Central America.

According to Matthew Cossolotto (President and Founder of Study Abroad Alumni International) in his recent address to study abroad alumni, it is not enough to think globally. One needs to strive to "be global" (Cossolotto, 2009, p. 567). Being global is a goal of many in higher education which has spurred the development of study abroad opportunities and general internationalization of curriculum. Martha Nussbaum (1997) states in *Cultivating Humanity* that "we must educate people who can operate as world citizens with sensitivity and understanding" (p. 52). This increase in intercultural education should assist in developing a global perspective among the youth involved in the program. Further, such a perspective should develop the skills needed to become "better informed members of the community and workforce" (Zhang, 2011, p. 181). Programming to destinations that are less focused on tourist activities and more on engagement and immersion in the local community are arguably more conducive to providing an opportunity to have a more genuine experience of the country being explored or studied. Given the anticipated benefits of this international perspective, extending these benefits from studying abroad to youth of the community through service-learning projects seems to be a logical expansion.

In the case of the "Exploring Central America" project, the student who studied abroad was able to offer first-hand stories, knowledge, photographs, and artifacts to the children she worked with, which piqued their interest and imparted to many of them the desire to learn

more about the world beyond their backyards. Starting this intercultural perspective and conversation at a young age could assist in preparing these children to function more effectively in this diverse and globalizing world. This expected increase in “desire to learn” and building of relationships is another benefit common to service-learning that this project epitomizes (Robeck, Laster, Jenne, & Brooks, 2003, p. 93). Although the assessment for this small scale project is limited to informal soft data, the hope is that the time spent in the program will serve as the stepping stone for these children into further interest in the world around them.

In much of the writing on service-learning, there is an emphasis on the creation of a “reciprocal relationship” because “service-learning” requires the learner and the person or group who is receiving the service to be involved. Both are valuable in creating the learning experience and both should benefit from the interaction. In addition to working to serve the children of the community, this program also allowed the student leader of the program to experience a common benefit of service-learning which is personal growth (Parker & Dautoff, 2007). She was able to develop interpersonally by coordinating the program volunteers, interacting with representatives from the school, and leading the afterschool program meetings, thus experiencing what is sometimes referred to as connective learning (Parker & Dautoff, 2007). She was able to develop cognitively, as well, by integrating the knowledge acquired abroad with an understanding of age appropriate activities to provide an engaging and quality experience for the groups attending the afterschool program. According to Braskamp and Engberg (2011), higher education stresses “the development of the ‘whole student’ along several dimensions—intellectual, social, civic, physical, moral, and spiritual” (p.34). Projects such as the aforementioned are closely aligned with the development of the “whole student” which is another notable benefit of the collaboration between the experiences of study abroad and service-learning opportunities.

## CHALLENGES

### STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

When developing the project there were challenges that were faced by the student, ranging from effective planning to dealing with classroom management. Many frustrations were in regard to dealing with the accompanying teachers who had a different approach to classroom management. Working on open communication was a key to overcoming this challenge. Learning how to address different styles in teaching and managing classroom behavior was an important lesson.

Another classroom challenge was to learn how to effectively adapt and adjust plans to an inconsistently sized group with a wide range of ages, skills, and other dynamics. This challenge was resolved by planning extra activities with a variety of age and skill levels in mind. Another way of addressing the diversity in ages was incorporating ways to make smaller group activities where everyone could be engaged at a level appropriate to them. Finding volunteers who were reliable and engaging was also a challenge, though by the start of the program a quality group of four college students was prepared to tackle the semester.

In terms of the study abroad experience, the primary challenges were financial and logistical concerns. The student was a Pell-grant recipient and thus was eligible to apply for the Gilman International Scholarship for study abroad. This scholarship, along with financial assistance from the study abroad program, made it possible for the student to participate in the semester abroad. Although not all students are so fortunate as to receive these particular scholarships, there are many opportunities available to assist students with limited financial resources. The volunteer mentor students may not have had the opportunity to study abroad, but they reaped secondary benefits from hearing about the experience. All of them reported having an increased understanding and interest in the region based on what they had learned through volunteering with the program. This aided in expanding their cross-cultural understanding and in the development of a global perspective. Although this certainly does not replace the study abroad experience, students returning from time abroad can actively enrich the lives of their peers by sharing their experiences of the world with them.

There was, as mentioned before, also the challenge of avoiding oversimplification of the countries and region presented in the project. When discussing with children alternate cultures which are complex, there is a danger of simplifying in a way that does not accurately present the culture or country. Finding ways to make points about differences between countries and cultures without slighting or misrepresenting either proved to be a challenge. When conscious of a prevalent Western perspective, one can work towards a deeper understanding of the “other” culture and its complexities by focusing on the presentation of diverse experiences and openly discussing barriers to understanding the whole picture. For example, Central America is an incredibly diverse region both culturally and geographically. Instead of presenting the entire region as a uniform entity, we spent several meetings talking about the differences and similarities between the geography and culture of the different countries in the region. The activities accompanying this discussion supported the understanding of this diversity. This lesson of understanding that the “other” is not uniform is a lesson easily taught in this context. All of these difficulties

and challenges, though sometimes frustrating, allowed for practice in flexibility, increased awareness of cultural and interpersonal skills, and frequent use of problem-solving skills.

### FACULTY PERSPECTIVE

A primary concern from the faculty perspective regarding any service-learning program is whether it will be sustainable beyond the initial event (Reisch, 2011). The afterschool program discussed here had been in existence for a couple of years prior to this student project. However, it had been evolving during that time and was “ripe” for supporting the enhancement proposed here. Due to the small size of the institution involved, it is unlikely at this point that study abroad students will be available to continue such an ambitious project every semester; however, the basic program itself will continue regardless, and future students can certainly imitate the model of focusing on a region in greater detail.

### FUTURE OF THE WORK

According to the article “How to build a service-learning program that lasts” (2004), institutional support is an important ingredient in sustaining a service-learning program. Institutional willingness to support the student and faculty member’s efforts, both financially and otherwise, was tremendously important in this case. Given the emphasis on service in the institution’s mission, we anticipate such support to continue. However, the project does currently rely on one faculty member in the psychology department. Ideally, other faculty members and disciplines should be recruited as well. For example, international business and international relations students might be encouraged to share their experiences from their study abroad, particularly if faculty in those disciplines believed in the importance of service-learning. The goal would be to keep the program in an academic home which is discipline-based and academically governed, as indicated in Butin’s (2010) book, *Service Learning in Theory and Practice*. The room for creativity and flexibility by connecting to other disciplines would likely benefit the overall health and sustainability of this program. We hope to see this program continue to flourish to the benefit of both the youth it serves and the emerging student leaders involved.

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