© Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, Volume 26, Number 3, p. 207, (2022)
 eISSN 2164-8212

Are the International Components of Global Learning Programs Ethical and Appropriate? Some Considerations Utilizing a Fair Trade Learning Framework

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Abstract

Educational approaches that emphasize engagement within community-based contexts in both domestic and international settings are widely recognized as high-impact pedagogical practices. However, the international components of global learning programs are increasingly being viewed through rigorous ethical lenses as the potential and actual harms of these initiatives have become more widely recognized. Six common criticisms of international components embedded within global learning programs are highlighted in this essay, along with responses and counterpoints to each. We assert that although each of these concerns warrants significant discussion, all six can be satisfactorily addressed using proactive and ethical strategies that are already employed in best-practice community-based global learning (CBGL) work.

Keywords: community engagement, global, community-based global learning, service-learning, international partnership

The Association of American Colleges and Universities has recognized diversity/global learning, service-learning, and community-based learning as significant high-impact practices in undergraduate pedagogy (Kuh, 2008). In particular, educational approaches that combine these practices are viewed as especially powerful, as they can facilitate students' understanding of the deep transnational interdependence of political, economic, and social systems (Hartman & Rola, 2000). The set of pedagogical practices collectively referred to as "international service-learning" has been historically viewed as the gold standard for global education (Crabtree, 2008). However, this work has been increasingly reframed by academics and local and international partner organizations as "global inquiry" through a more widely recognized understanding that such critical global inquiry can be effectively accomplished within both international and domestic/local partnerships (Alonso García & Longo, 2013; Longo & Saltmarsh, 2011; Whitehead, 2015). This philosophical shift is critically important, as it replaces earlier conceptual frameworks—that were linear, location-based, and focused on divisions defined by political boundaries—with frameworks that are interdependent, interconnected, holistic, and focused on ecological networks of relationships (Alonso García & Longo, 2013; Keith, 2005). Recently, Hartman et al. (2018) have provided a model of critical global inquiry that both advances collaborative community development and mitigates some of the recognized perils of this work, such as the reinforcement of stereotypes and patterns of privilege, as well as significant potential harms to vulnerable populations, especially children and medical patients. In this essay, we will avoid use of the term "service-learning" whenever possible, and instead follow the lead of Hartman et al. (2018) by referring to programs and initiatives that integrate critical global inquiry

as *community-based global learning* (CBGL). Unfortunately, some of the "international service-learning" programs of the past are now being erroneously referred to as CBGL despite not being in line with the best-practice principles set forth by Hartman et al. (2018). In many cases, these programs have not been adjusted to properly reflect the evolution, systemic complexity, and reciprocity vital to high-impact, equitable, sustainable, and ethical practice standards of CBGL.

Regardless of the program's title, international global learning initiatives are increasingly being viewed through rigorous ethical lenses. As a result, the potential and actual harms of these initiatives have been brought into sharp focus. These ethical concerns are not new—Ivan Illich (1968/1994) spoke poignantly about them in his famous 1968 speech "To Hell With Good Intentions," delivered to the Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects (CIASP) in Cuernavaca, Mexico In this work, Illich pointed a damning spotlight at "voluntourist" attitudes; the perceptions of United States economic, political, and social exceptionalism that are commonly held by U.S. volunteers working in international contexts; and the extensive damage caused by well-intentioned but ignorant "community development" initiatives that are created without input from the communities they hope to serve. More recently, Mitchell (2008) has suggested that academic service-learning has bifurcated into two distinct subgroups: (1) "traditional" service-learning, which emphasizes service experiences that are largely disconnected from their broader economic, political, social, cultural, and historical contexts, and (2) "critical" service-learning, which is grounded in multiple contexts and is intentional about seeking to disrupt systems of injustice and inequality. Mitchell's conceptualization of critical service-learning has advanced the field by encouraging academic service activities that are explicitly political and function to shift power dynamics toward permanently dismantling the societal structures that underlie inequity. Additionally, critical service-learning emphasizes the reflective and analytical engagement of participants with the concept of what it means to "serve," as well as their positionality within broader power structures (Rice & Pollack, 2000). Hartman et al. (2018) promoted a model of critical global inquiry that further extends Mitchell's concept of critical service-learning by explicitly focusing on deeper considerations of student engagement in broad, multilevel, and globally interconnected systems. Although the field is becoming more accepting of the important role of criticality in this work (Jones & Kiser, 2014), many mainstream academic institutions have only recently begun to reenvision their service programming in response to the significant ethical concerns raised by Illich, Mitchell, and many others (for example, see Smaller & O'Sullivan, 2018).

Contemporary conceptualizations of ethically acceptable critical global inquiry increasingly center on the value of the local in addition to the international (Longo & Saltmarsh, 2011). The reorientation toward the local has only been enhanced by the travel restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Motley et al., 2021). These pandemic-related travel limitations, a heightened sensitivity to issues of student inclusion and access to international experiences, and the focus on being community-oriented instead of service-oriented, have all increased interest in internationalization at home (IaH) strategies that enhance international engagement entirely from within local contexts (Agnew & Kahn, 2014). For all of these reasons, we believe that the international components of all global learning programs are at a crossroads, presenting multiple important ethical questions that must be meaningfully considered and equitably addressed.

Common Objections to International Experiences

As academic and community practitioners become more aware of these ethical concerns, some have begun to question (largely outside the published peer-reviewed literature) the value and appropriateness of offering international experiences to students. Thoughtful criticism of international "service" programming has been present in the public sphere as well, perhaps most notably from Cole (2012). In our experience, the following statements capture six of the most common objections to international components of global learning:

1. *Why international instead of local?* There are an essentially infinite number of opportunities for students to participate in meaningful community-based global inquiry work on campus or within an hour's drive of nearly any college or university in the United States.

Students, academics, and colleges/universities should not expect, model, or promote traveling around the globe as the standard to measure critical global inquiry, global engagement, and global learning.

2. *International programming frequently lacks depth.* Short term or relatively brief international learning engagements do not allow for the deep level of building and sustaining equitable and mutually beneficial partnerships that community-based global learning ethically requires.

3. *Inequities in who benefits financially.* The funds spent on transportation, food, lodging, and global inquiry work for international global learning efforts often end up in the hands of corporate multinationals and a small number of United States– and European Union–based service providers instead of staying within the local communities.

4. *Monetary and temporal expense.* International travel is expensive and time consuming. Both of these concerns limit student access and inclusion of diverse student populations.

5. *Low return on investment.* From a return-on-investment perspective, the cost of international student travel is not "money well spent." This is especially true when considering what those funds could be used to accomplish in the hands of a capable local partner organization.

6. *Environmental costs.* International components of global learning are inexcusably bad for the environment—they create an elective and unnecessary carbon emissions burden at a time when the planet can least afford it.

Through our roles as academic leaders of community-based global learning programs, we believe that each of these concerns is important, legitimate, and worthy of discussion. However, we also strongly assert that, if planned and executed properly, international components of CBGL can both address these criticisms and play a fundamental and ethical role in holistic student learning and development that cannot be fully replicated in other contexts. Incorporating international components to CBGL must be carefully investigated, preplanned, and aligned with high-quality, high-impact standards of practice. We believe that we have developed CBGL programs that put into practice the programmatic strategies that effectively mitigate and/or diffuse each of these concerns. Much of our thinking in this area is explicitly grounded in the principles of fair trade learning (Hartman, 2015; Hartman et al., 2014). Fair trade learning provides international as well as domestic/local CBGL with a powerful framework of practical ethical standards that promote equity, justice, and an understanding of interconnectedness.

In the following sections, we address each of the concerns listed above in turn, and do so using both our personal CBGL program leadership experience and the fair trade learning guidelines as foundations for our responses. It is important to understand that both the fair trade learning guidelines and the suggestions we offer are intended to be aspirational (Hartman et al., 2018). Each academic program, institution, and community relationship is unique, and limits on temporal and financial resources may constrain the practical execution of these best practices. Following the motivation of Hartman et al. (2018), we hope that sharing our thinking and experiences can challenge others in the field to work toward these common goals to create and sustain programming that is rooted in equity, justice, and reciprocity.

1. Why International Instead of Local?

Although potential local partnerships and engagement opportunities are sometimes overlooked in favor of international experiences that may seem more appealing to students, this criticism is based on the antiquated view and model of international service-learning versus high-quality CBGL. This antiquated model also perpetuates a false domestic/international dichotomy within this work that must be rejected. Both local and international settings have important and complementary roles in the emerging conceptualization of critical global inquiry, and programs built around current best practices frequently utilize both. CBGL emphasizes interdependency and an ecological view of interrelatedness—through this lens, the importance and centrality of political borders and other constructed artifacts falls away (Alonso García & Longo, 2013; Hartman et al., 2018; Longo & Saltmarsh, 2011; Whitehead, 2015).

Without question, internationally situated global learning programs that are poorly conceptualized and executed are wasteful

of resources and pose significant risks to partner communities. These risks include potential harms to children and medical patients, as well as the perpetuation of stereotypes, "voluntourist" mindsets, and unjust relational power dynamics (Hartman et al., 2018). However, local experiential programming is not immune to these risks—consider, for example, the widespread and problematic practice of "community service days" on college and university campuses throughout the United States. Simply keeping things local will not inoculate programs from "do-gooder-ism," unjust othering, and other problematic mindsets. International experiences that are short in duration; fail to promote authentic reciprocal student–community relationships; and patronize hotels, restaurants, and transportation providers that are external to the communities being engaged must be discouraged. Such "parachute" experiences do not push students into uncomfortable new spaces that are personally or intellectually challenging, offering no progress toward the meaningful or transformational student development outcomes that are their ostensible goals: (1) a sustained reorientation of personal and lifestyle choices, habits, and values; (2) a deeper understanding of self and purpose; (3) an expanded sense of solidarity and social responsibility; (4) increased appreciation for complexity and ambiguity; (5) enhanced awareness and questioning of culturally constructed social norms, assumptions, or values; and (6) increased personal actions to promote equity and justice (Kiely, 2004, 2005).

This observation, however, does not yet address the question of "why travel internationally?" International CBGL experiences that avoid the above-stated pitfalls can serve as unique drivers of powerful student growth. When partner communities are engaged as equals, utilized as true cocreators and coeducators in academic experiences, treated as experts, and exert meaningful agency in regard to how programmatic relationships are developed and maintained, the outcomes from such relationships will produce substantial developmental benefits for both students and community partners alike. Programs must carefully plan and implement meaningful academic engagement for all participants and support the practice of cultural humility, which emphasizes a lifelong and ongoing personal commitment to engage in (1) meaningful self-evaluation/self-critique, (2) identifying and resolving power imbalances, and (3) cocreating and codeveloping mutually beneficial partnerships (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Programs must also emphasize the use of local resources and providers for student food (locally sourced), lodging (such as homestays or community hostels), and transportation (providers that community members identify, oversee, and benefit from) needs prior to, during, and following all CBGL experiences. When performed properly, international CBGL experiences foster moments of powerful integrative personal development, in circumstances where student engagement with diversity is intentional and scaffolded (Salisbury & Goodman, 2009). Ethical engagement with unfamiliar cultural practices; educational, economic, and social contexts; and physical environments in international settings can drive student intellectual and personal growth in ways that simply cannot be replicated within domestic locations.

The other point to be made here is one that is often overlooked: How can partner communities derive benefit from international CBGL experiences? One of the primary contributions of the principles of fair trade learning (Hartman, 2015; Hartman et al., 2014) to this dialogue is a recentering of academic organization–partner relationships in ways where positive and definable outcomes to all stakeholders are of equal importance. When developing and maintaining international partnerships, it is critical to avoid paternalistic approaches as well as ones that may, inadvertently or not, be rooted in colonialism (such as relationship structures that implicitly place partner communities solely in the role of resource providers, or inequities in systems grounded in colonial-era policies) or other problematic power dynamics (Sharpe & Dear, 2013; Tiessen et al., 2018; VanLeeuwen et al., 2017). When performed in an ethically appropriate way, such partnerships will yield significant and unique benefits to all stakeholders (Bringle et al., 2009).

2. International Programming Frequently Lacks Depth

We completely agree with this criticism. The typical historical model of "service-learning" that involves brief encounters between communities and students who "parachute" in for a few days (or less) is a harmful practice. Short term, superficial partnerships are not ethically appropriate, and are based on

an impoverished model of community engagement that must not be further perpetuated. Thankfully, professionals in the field are increasingly recognizing the problematic nature of this type of superficial encounter (such as student participant emphasis of difference, rather than similarity, when relating to community members; Adarlo et al., 2019) and have advanced multiple models (including fair trade learning) that support deeper, more meaningful, and equitable relationships between students and community members. We assert that best practices of international CBGL should include the development and support of program/community partnerships over a multiyear time span. Community partners must have a meaningful and authentic role in cocreating such partnerships, including (1) active agency in determining how success is defined and the ways in which benefits from the partnership are allocated, (2) coownership in the creation and implementation of learning objectives and syllabi, (3) selection of program participants, and (4) codeveloping and participating in evaluation and reflection activities (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Tiessen et al., 2018). Prior to the experience itself, both program and community participants in a partnership must engage in significant educational experiences that will function to maximize outcomes and programmatic success. For visiting students, such experiences may take the form of extended coursework and readings to better understand issues related to ethics, cultural humility, and cultural literacy. Ideally, these activities should occur before, during, and after the visit itself. For community members, such experiences might include learning more about the program's overarching educational goals and coming to understand the motivations for their partnership being sought. The equitable and meaningful incorporation of community voices in international CBGL efforts is particularly important during program evaluation as well as the production and publication of program-related scholarship.

As noted by Cayuela et al. (2020) and VanLeeuwen et al. (2017), the existent peer-reviewed literature on CBGL is skewed heavily toward work conducted in the United States (and/or by U.S. scholars) and published in English-language journals by organizations located in the United States or Europe. Additionally, the critical differences in how CBGL is conceptualized and undertaken within diverse academic institutional and community partner contexts both inside and outside the United States must not be overlooked (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019; Bheekie et al., 2016; Cayuela et al., 2020; Cress et al., 2010; Gregorová & Heinzová, 2019; Hatcher & Erasmus, 2008; Iverson & Espenschied-Reilly, 2010; Leung et al., 2007; Ma et al., 2019; Patrick et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2011; VanLeeuwen et al., 2017; Xing, 2010). For these reasons, community partners should be incorporated as lead or colead authors on any scholarship that results from a CBGL partnership (see Gendle & Senadeera, 2020, for an example of one such coauthorship). A failure to do so will only serve to perpetuate dominant narratives and United States–centric lenses in the literature and further marginalize critically important viewpoints and perspectives.

3. Inequities in Who Benefits Financially

Unfortunately, many international global learning programs have not done a proper job in creating financial benefits for their partner communities through their logistical expenditures. Often, this is a consequence of these programs' failure to develop authentic and mutually beneficial community partnerships. Such partnerships allow for the open, honest, and direct discussion of finances and provider options without requiring a third party to negotiate or make arrangements. Indeed, the use of such third parties to handle logistical details is orthogonal to the principles of fair trade learning and must be avoided. Of course, there are no alternative options in regard to arranging international flights, as locally owned and operated international air carriers do not exist. For this reason (along with the large carbon burden of air travel), programs must utilize public state transportation infrastructure (such as trains and bus services) or locally owned and operated transportation providers for transit within international locations and avoid commercial domestic air travel whenever possible. Programs must be intentional in their use of community-based logistics providers (homestays, local ground transport companies, food prepared by locally owned businesses or in private homes) that keep the capital from these expenditures in the pockets of local communities.

When utilizing local providers, it is critical to ensure that all parties are receiving fair compensation for services rendered, and that the providers themselves are able to dictate compensation models and amounts

that meet their needs. It is also important that university programs take the time to understand the power dynamics and structures within their partner communities, in order to avoid outcomes where the financial benefits of partnerships are directed toward a small subset of community beneficiaries, or otherwise distributed in an inequitable way. When executed thoughtfully and intentionally, sustained CBGL programs can directly benefit communities in a number of ways: (1) creation of new business and employment opportunities, particularly for young people; (2) promotion of economic diversification; (3) preservation and conservation of rural cultural practices, heritage, and natural resources; and (4) creation of markets for local arts, crafts, and other goods (Gendle & Senadeera, 2020; Wijesundara, 2019, 2020).

4. Monetary and Temporal Expense

It is incumbent upon all professionals in this work to be both attentive and responsive to all issues related to student access and inclusion. Unfortunately, there is no denying the reality that international travel is expensive and beyond the financial and temporal resource capacities of some of the students that we serve. Yet, given the multiple ways in which an authentic and ethical international learning experience can positively affect holistic student growth, we must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. In other words, valid criticisms of international experiences that are grounded in concerns related to financial or temporal pressures must be constructively utilized in arguments to advance institutional inclusion and equity efforts (including fundraising), rather than as a justification to do away with international experiences entirely.

A number of strategies can be employed in the service of enhancing student access and inclusion to international experiences. First, program leaders must be creative in both aggressively cutting costs and identifying resources to support students. One of the benefits of utilizing local providers for lodging and meals is that these services are often markedly less expensive (even after ensuring a fair rate of compensation) than establishments that cater primarily to tourist groups. By utilizing local community knowledge and expertise, providers can be identified that are both eager to offer students an enhanced experience and equipped to do so in an ethical way. The use of local providers is also critical because it keeps capital within local communities—this capital can then support economic, social, and environmental development that might not otherwise occur. Program leaders must also be prepared to engage in the critical on-campus work of effective fundraising to support international engagement and donor stewardship with individuals and organizations both internal and external to their institution. Additionally, program leaders must also be willing to listen to, and work with, the students they serve to identify particular times where international experiences can be best accommodated. For example, we have identified a 3-week block in late May and early June (after the end of our university's spring semester, but before the beginning of many of the students' summer jobs, classes, and internship experiences) for scheduling international CBGL experiences that both offers significant temporal flexibility and minimizes opportunity costs borne by the students.

Nevertheless, we must also be ever mindful of the reality that for some students, an international experience will remain inaccessible. Additionally, some students may have no interest in international travel, but would still benefit from the types of engagement that such programs offer. For all students, we must advance IaH strategies that are in parallel with, rather than in lieu of, traditional international programming (Agnew & Kahn, 2014). In this work, we suggest a best practice model that incorporates both international and domestic opportunities for learning that collectively support a more cohesive and holistic educational experience. For example, one of the authors (MG) has constructed immersive, student cohort-based, multiyear CBGL experiences that involved student work on the ground in Sri Lanka as well as with Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora groups in central North Carolina and at a local Tamil language school. This integrative experience facilitated meaningful student engagement across multiple contexts, and increased access and inclusion by providing ways for students to take part in international experiential components that were situated within 60 miles of campus.

5. Low Return on Investment

Some may suggest that from a return-on-investment perspective, the cost of international student travel is not "money well spent," and these funds could be used to

accomplish much more in the hands of a capable local partner organization. From a detached economic viewpoint, this is indeed true. However, this argument implies that student tuition used to provide coursework to support international components of community-based global learning is also not "money well spent." Such economic criticism of international experiences is misplaced. As educators, we must never lose sight of our primary objective—which is to promote the holistic development of our students, not to run or fund an NGO or aid organization. Of course (as discussed above), student development must not come at the expense of partner communities, as one of the core principles of fair trade learning is *dual purposes*—the idea that student learning and community outcomes must be accorded equal importance at all times (Hartman et al., 2014). Meaningful student and partner community growth is indeed a significant return on investment, but it is also one that programs need to make an effort to describe and/or quantify. Programs should work with their community-based partner organizations to cocreate assessment strategies that can provide evidence to support student development, community growth, and the realized value of the partnership to the community. These strategies can include both instruments that are publicly available, such as the Global Engagement Survey (GES; Hartman et al., 2015), the Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale (TRES; Clayton et al., 2010), or surveys and other metrics unique to a given program. As discussed in our response to Criticism 1, community-based experiences with an international component offer truly unique opportunities to facilitate deeply meaningful student growth. These experiences can also have a multiplicative effect for both students and partner communities. Students return to their own home communities with an enhanced understanding of the complexity of global systems, as well as the value of local educational, political, social, and economic investments. Cocreated relationships may also facilitate sustainable positive growth and benefits within partner communities as well. It is therefore difficult to argue that, when executed equitably and ethically, such experiences could truly constitute a waste of resources.

6. Environmental Costs

International components of global learning carry a large environmental burden, and of the six criticisms we present, this is the most difficult to effectively resolve. Carbon outputs generated by international academic travel will continue to be a major concern until humanity develops and adopts a meaningful global renewable energy strategy. For now, the question of principal importance is whether the benefits (in terms of student and community growth) of international travel outweigh the significant environmental costs. We believe that if international experiences are constructed with great thought and care, the answer to this question can potentially be yes. In our own work, we have successfully employed a number of strategies to minimize the carbon footprint of our program's international activities.

Much of this impact minimization boils down to being thoughtful and intentional in regard to planning student experiences. In addition to the positive community benefits that are derived from patronizing locally owned businesses, the avoidance of large commercial hotels and restaurants can significantly reduce the environmental impact of international programming. Additional carbon savings can be achieved by minimizing the number of trips that are made for each experience, choosing flights that have the smallest possible number of connections (as a notable proportion of a flight's carbon burden comes from the large amount of fuel expended during takeoff), and utilizing public transportation in host communities whenever it is possible and safe to do so. Environmental costs can be reduced further still by focusing on international locations that are hemispherically local. Programs can also calculate carbon footprints for all travel activities, and make it a standard practice to purchase carbon offsets for travel that are "additional" (meaning the offset activity would not have occurred without the capital derived from the offset purchase), retired to prevent reuse, permanent, and third-party certified.

It must be recognized that carbon offsets are, at best, a "Band-aid" in this work, rather than a long-term solution to carbon emissions. They do not prevent emissions from happening, nor do they stop the negative effects of those emissions on global climate systems. However, offsets do provide the best solution at present to mitigate the environmental burdens of travel within the current global energy economy. Whether thinking about costs in terms of money,

time, potential community partner harm, or burdens to the environment, no international CBGL experience will ever be free. It is incumbent upon the administrators of these programs, in equal partnership with community members, to meaningfully and carefully consider the broad benefit/harm ratio for any program, and be willing to significantly adjust or terminate activities if this ratio is not positive. To facilitate these considerations, as well as to hold programs accountable for both their impacts and operational improvements, programmatic incorporation of some type of systematic sustainability reporting should be encouraged (Ceulemans et al., 2015).

Conclusions

In this essay, we have attempted to respond to what we consider six main criticisms of internationally situated global learning programs. Although each of these criticisms is serious and must be afforded significant thought and consideration, none (in our view) are an Achilles' heel to this type of work. Creating and sustaining programs that properly and ethically address these concerns is a complex endeavor, but this is work that can and must be performed. However, it is also critical to note that such work should never be considered complete—humility is key to this endeavor, as there will always be something new to be learned and changes to make based upon the wisdom of partner communities and experienced practitioners in the field. Although this essay has focused on international components of global learning, we assert that all CBGL programs should be constructed in thoughtful ways that follow a global inquiry model that incorporates substantive geographically local partnerships and engagement experiences (along with international opportunities) as a central component to all programmatic offerings. Critical global inquiry, rooted in a community-based participatory approach, is ideal for a number of reasons: the ability to engage with substantive challenges and opportunities across a variety of contexts, increased programmatic flexibility, reduced financial costs, increased student access and inclusion, and active involvement and collaboration with communities as equal partners. By adopting such a framework, programs that are in line with CBGL practices will be best able to serve and meaningfully advance the interests of their students, community partners, and institutions.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Bob Frigo (assistant dean of campus life and director of the Kernodle Center for Civic Life at Elon University, in Elon, NC) for his helpful commentary on an early draft of this manuscript, as well as for many thoughtful conversations over the years regarding the topics addressed here.

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