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Assessing and Evaluating International Service-Learning

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Last year's national survey of incoming college freshmen, conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, found that two of every three respondents (66.3%) rated helping others in difficulty as essential or very important, and no less than 83 percent indicated that they had volunteered at least occasionally during their final year in high school. Over a quarter said they were likely to continue volunteering in college, and 67.3 percent said there was some chance that they would; only a little over eight percent said they definitely would not. All of these positive numbers are increases over the previous year.

At the same time, study abroad is rising in the priorities of students and institutions. Record numbers of American students are studying abroad annually – around 180,000. The Lincoln Commission, set up by Congress to make proposals on implementing an Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program, has proposed that the United States seek over the next ten years to increase the number of Americans studying abroad in a given year to one million. This figure, equivalent to about half of the number of undergraduate degrees awarded annually by US institutions, would represent a more than fivefold increase over present numbers. Several institutions are calling for an international experience as part of the academic program of all undergraduates and others are working to remove obstacles to study abroad and to create new incentives.

This confluence of civic engagement and international experience signifies great potential for international service-learning. Students choosing service-learning for their international experience enjoy numerous educational advantages along with the satisfaction of having contributed in a meaningful way to their host culture. Studies conducted by the International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership suggest that the kind of engagement that comes from service-learning in a foreign country is far more intense than conventional study abroad: not only is the student crossing national borders, cultural borders, and often linguistic borders, but he or she is plunged into the life of the host country, often at a level where differences are huge and where the student is required to make decisions, render service, or speak a language under truly demanding circumstances.

In the globalized world of the twenty-first century, differences among the industrialized countries, real though they may be, are steadily eroding, with internationalized cultural products, blandly similar retail outlets, and converging educational practices. Most American students in other countries never escape the elitist bubble. The same cannot be said for most students engaged in community service, who come face to face with social deprivation, limited educational opportunities, and inadequate medical facilities. Foreign-language students learn fast in such an environment, complacency evaporates, and received ideas are

jettisoned. And not only is education taking place, but the students are performing socially useful service, which is, or should be, valued by the educators as well as the agencies where their students work.

But international service-learning faces two major problems.

First, experience tells us that crossover programs are hard to popularize and sustain. International service-learning is in some sense neither fish nor fowl. It is not conventional study abroad, for which most colleges and universities have their own offices, with personnel trained to provide advice on what might be regarded as normal study abroad programs. Nor is it conventional community service, also the province of a special office in most institutions, nor even conventional service-learning. Community service offices are accustomed to providing placements for students who are spending the rest of their time in conventional study, or to working with faculty members to design service-learning options that are course-specific. With international service-learning we cross a sharp institutional divide, between study abroad specialists with little knowledge of community service, and community service specialists with limited international experience. Though international service-learning seems perfectly positioned to take care of two institutional priorities at the same time, making it visible and hence desirable will require careful planning, ingenuity, and strong evidence to support its claims.

Second, as in other areas of service-learning and study abroad, quality is a significant issue. If we regard study abroad, say, as an unalloyed positive; or if we see service-learning as invariably beneficial – then any program is a good program. But poor design and execution can have the opposite of the intended effect. A class trip to a foreign country, on which the American students stick together, laugh at the locals, and generously pay for a few broken hotel mirrors, only confirms prejudice. How many of the 180,000 students allegedly studying abroad are in fact engaged in reinforcing their negative feelings about people different from themselves? Even a well-meaning short-term trip to some foreign location in need of a well or health clinic or vaccinations may not do a lot to bring students into contact with the local culture – in fact may be only one step up from cutting one's grandparents' lawn. Educational quality, depth of students' experience, clarity of everyone's goals, and long-term monitoring of results are essential if we are to achieve results and create a place for ourselves in the higher-education landscape. In fact, we need to think of study abroad or service-learning or any of their combinations as processes, in which a single experience may be only part of an extended process of learning, and in which multiple experiences may build on one another.

There are different ways of thinking about assessment and evaluation. I want, in my remaining time, to touch on three. The first I will call assessing planning and planning for assessment. The second has to do with evaluating programs. The third relates to the assessment of student experience.

Assessing Planning and Planning for Assessment

Some institutions are further along than this, but we should remind ourselves that the first step in establishing international service-learning activities is planning for them. What does this mean in practical terms? First, you must know what actually goes on in your institution

(how many students study abroad, how many are engaged in service-learning, where they go, what they do, what expertise exists internally, especially among the faculty). Second, you should look at how international service-learning fits with your institution's priorities, especially its strategic planning priorities, and base your own effort on the support of these priorities. Third, you must get the various stakeholders involved and show them how international service-learning will help them achieve their planning objectives. These stakeholders are first and foremost faculty and senior administration, but it is often the middle-level managers that determine the success or failure of a program, and they must be involved as well. Students must be consulted and mobilized. Other groups – parents, local organizations, existing international linkages – may be important too. One reason for involving stakeholders early is not only to get them excited about what you want to do (and modifying it to take care of their concerns or to take advantage of opportunities), but also to move to a fourth objective – removing bureaucratic, procedural, and attitudinal obstacles. These will be different in different institutions.

At the end of this process, you will be better able to design a successful international service-learning program (along with ways of assessing its effectiveness) and keep it flourishing and engaged with the institution. This program may make use of other people's services, sending students on other programs that are well established; or it may involve creating something of your own. If you do run your own programs, or even if you make use of other people's, you need to know how effective they are – and this requires planning and assessment, including pre-departure assessment of students, cumulative on-site evaluation, and ongoing assessment after students return.

Evaluating Programs

A few years ago, I served as director of a project funded by the Ford Foundation to assess the effectiveness of the programs of the International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership. The results of our research are contained in the book *Service-Learning Across Cultures* (2004).¹ The book contains a chapter entitled “Evaluating Partnership Programs,” in which we lay out criteria that might be used to assess the quality of individual programs run by the Partnership. The criteria were established in part on the basis of the Model Assessment Practice that IES uses for its study abroad programs (<http://www.iesabroad.org/iesMap.do>), but were adapted and expanded to fit international service-learning. They grew out of extensive and intensive discussion among program directors, board members, students and others, conducted during our research, and their focus is on the effectiveness of Partnership programs primarily for the students passing through them. They are easily adapted to the programs of other organizations and institutions.

They begin with a couple of “framing questions” that are vitally necessary to the entire procedure. It is obviously crucially important to define the goals of international service-learning for your institution. Preferably those goals should include having an effect not only on your students and their values, but also on the populations you seek to serve. In planning service-learning we all too frequently assert that service-learning is “good” for our students without asking whether it is also good for the agencies where they work. And all too

¹ Humphrey Tonkin, ed. *Service-Learning Across Cultures: Promise and Achievement*. New York: IPSL, 2004.

frequently we will happily jettison agencies who will not do what we want them to do to meet our credentialing needs, with no consideration of the work that the agencies are doing. Such disregard for the effectiveness of programs on their target populations can and should be seen as a breach of ethics: the agencies do not exist for the benefit of visiting American students. I might add that people running conventional study abroad programs that may not involve service-learning are increasingly conscious of the environmental impact of their programs on their host communities and are looking for ways to be socially useful.

But, beyond these obvious ethical questions are questions about your goals in offering international service-learning opportunities in the first place. Are you looking for an in-depth, sustained experience? Are you more interested in having large numbers of students gain at least some experience in combining service and learning abroad? If the latter, what mechanisms do you have in place to make sure that there are opportunities for further analogous experiences? If the former, what opportunities exist for students coming off an in-depth experience to share that experience with others and to sort through their own values as they return? Defining these framing questions is important not least because it helps avoid assessing success purely on the basis of numbers.

Our criteria are divided into eight sets – on predeparture, arrival, instruction, service placements, learning, staff, resources and procedures, and assessment. I will not provide details here: the document is easily accessible. But I would stress one point quite emphatically. It is obvious but it bears repeating. International service-learning is more than simply service and learning, since it integrates the one with the other in a unified whole. It must be judged in its own terms. It is also a relatively new field, although its earliest manifestations go back to the 1950s; and research on its effects is still in its infancy.

Some of the criteria listed in our chapter are quite easy to assess: students either have health insurance or they do not, and we do not need researchers to tell us how to find that out. While most of the others aim at a kind of transparent objectivity, they depend perhaps more than they should on subjective evaluation. We need more research both on the value and validity of the criteria themselves and also on what might be called the underpinnings of individual programs – issues of academic quality, the extent to which programs do in fact change student views and affect their values, the power and effectiveness of reflection. So, as would-be researchers ponder how best to enter the field, they should bear in mind the problem of program assessment. Evaluation is not research, but research on the *criteria* for evaluation is badly needed.

And what is it that makes international service-learning unique? Most serious practitioners of service-learning as a pedagogical device will tell us that the key element in service-learning is the process of reflection. In many domestic programs reflection is not accorded the emphasis it should receive, in part because it is very difficult to organize and conduct. Only a faculty member who fully understands both community and institution and empathizes with both (while at the same time having good rapport with students) is likely to succeed. Many service-learning initiatives have foundered for lack of attention to reflection, or lack of attention to faculty development in general. American faculty members may lack sufficient knowledge of the host country to provide adequate guidance to students in the field, and non-Americans may lack the needed level of empathy and understanding in dealing with American students. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to the rapid development of international

service-learning programs is not the presence of assorted institutional barriers but the lack of faculty expertise, both in this country and abroad, since such expertise must combine a sensitivity to and knowledge of service-learning and a high level of cross-cultural skill coupled with a thorough knowledge of the country in question.

The Assessment of Student Experience

In the volume *Service-Learning Across Cultures* there is a chapter, written by Robert Bringle and me, in which we lay out a research agenda on international service-learning. It originated in part from a session that the two of us directed at the international service-learning conference in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in January 2004. As one might expect, the list of research priorities that we compiled at that time is the kind of list that a group of higher education experts would be likely to compile: heavy on perspectives on students and on program design, but relatively light on agency outcomes and on institutional transformation. It draws in part on Bob Bringle's long acquaintance with, and distinguished work on, service-learning research.²

As far as I am concerned, the most interesting group of issues comes at the end of the Chiang Mai list, in a kind of grab-bag category called "Theoretical Issues and Research Design." Most of these issues relate to cross-cultural perceptions. A recent volume put out by the IPSL Press, addresses what its editor, Linda Chisholm, entitles *Visions of Service*, the ways in which five of the world's great religions look at the concept of service and at the individual's responsibility to society as a whole.³ The fact is that the concept of service means different things to different cultures – just as the concept of learning means different things to different cultures, and to subcultures within each culture. In his book on non-western educational traditions, Timothy Reagan points out that an understanding of how other peoples educate their young "may help us to think more clearly about some of our own assumptions and values."⁴ The same is true of service. Perhaps one of the first things that we have to ask ourselves as we design assessment instruments is whether our underlying assumptions are American assumptions or whether we need also to think of international service-learning more broadly. Given that much of the information that we compile may be used to convince doubters at home, we may need to meet their expectations halfway.

The so-called Chiang Mai list that Bob Bringle and I compiled covers research in six areas: student recruitment, applications, and acceptances; student characteristics and outcomes; community service; the design of international service-learning; the practice of international service-learning; and, finally, theoretical issues. The first and second of these topics, the handling of admission to programs and the characteristics of students, include, beyond the obvious, such questions as (1) student motives for international service-learning, including religion and other personal convictions, and prior experience with service and service-learning, (2) characteristics of likely successful candidates for international service-learning, (3) the role of language acquisition and proficiency in service settings, (4) comparisons of language proficiency gains among study abroad, international service-learning, and other

² Robert G. Bringle, Mindy A. Phillips & Michael Hudson. *The Measure of Service Learning: Research Scales to Assess Student Experiences*. Washington: American Psychological Association. 2004.

³ Linda A. Chisholm, ed. *Visions of Service*. New York: IPSL, 2004.

⁴ Timothy Reagan. *Non-Western Educational Traditions*. Third edition. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005.

ways of learning a foreign language; (5) changes in students' political, social, cultural, and personal views on international issues (e.g., foreign aid, peace initiatives, monetary policies), and (6) changes in students' behavior as a result of international service-learning (voting, public service, volunteer service, etc.). I need hardly add that several of these questions remain unanswered not only for international service-learning but for both of its components: service-learning in the US, and study abroad in general.

We go on to ask about the characteristics of successful agency placements, the impact of service-learning on communities, the structuring and assessment of reflection in the service-learning process, differences between short-term and long-term experiences, leadership education and its relationship to international service-learning, and the replicability of successful experiments – questions germane to student assessment, but perhaps secondary.

When we conducted the Partnership study, our activities included the convening of a number of focus groups in an intensive two-day assessment of the impact of their experience on a group of alumni of our programs. Here and elsewhere, many talked of their experience as “transformative.” I am deeply skeptical of the term and its assumptions, which may say more about how we as a society have structured our understanding of the lives of young people, and young people's willingness to read the script that we have handed them. But there is no doubt that talk of transformation occurs more frequently in programs that force students into a different cultural environment and oblige them to readjust their perspective on the world. For my own part, I am most interested not in how the psyches of our young people may have changed, but in how they view the world before and after, and how their lives become more socially productive through their experience. What counts here is behavior. Talk is cheap, as any educator who puts a premium on talking knows all too well. If we can show that a result of our work is positive action, and if we can design programs to achieve that objective, we will surely have succeeded.

It goes without saying that international service-learning is important in these parlous times. Americans are often too ready to assume that the rest of the world is fundamentally like the United States: give people their freedom and they will turn around and elect a school board; offer them democracy and they will use it to elect a viable government. They are apt to suppose that it is only evil people who undermine these cherished assumptions, and that the fight against evil is a worthy cause. But we are neither as good as we suppose, nor are our adversaries as evil as we would like to think. Indeed, the world is far messier than we imagine it to be from our distant vantage point in North America, or even from the vantage point of the globalized elite to which we belong. Engaging with that world in a direct way may change our attitudes for the better, lowering our expectations, but increasing our resolve to leave a better world for future generations. Never before has understanding the world been as important as it is today, and, I would venture to suggest, no better form of education about the world has ever been invented than living the life of that world side by side with the diversity of its inhabitants. And that is what international service-learning offers and why it matters so much.