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International Service-Learning: Service in Learning, or Learning in Service?

Keynote Address

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Sixty-eight years ago, in 1940, the great urban planner Lewis Mumford, looking out across America, saw young people, as he put it, “starving for real tasks and vital opportunities.” Many of them live, he wrote in his book *Faith for Living*,¹ “like sleepwalkers.” “The young will care for their regional home if they have a part in creating it.... They should help clear the slums as well as study housing: they should help plant the forests as well as study conservation.... It should not need another war to effect this purposeful mobilization of youth.” Within a few months of the publication of Mumford’s book, World War II had engulfed the country, and there was no shortage of things for young people to do. But Mumford’s suggestion, born of his observations of the effects of the Great Depression and based in its way on John Dewey’s belief in the educational relationship of thought and experience, is as relevant today as it was when it was written.

Eighteen years after Mumford had written these words, so precisely fifty years ago, two groups of young people went abroad to engage in volunteer work. One group went from the United States to Africa, in the first program run by Crossroads Africa, an organization that is still in existence and still organizing short-term programs of assistance in Africa (<http://operationcrossroadsafrica.org>). A second group went from Britain to locations in West Africa and Southeast Asia under the banner of VSO, Voluntary Service Overseas, also an organization still doing excellent work (<http://www.vso.org.uk>).

The driving force behind the VSO program was a man named Alec Dickson. It was in his writings that I found the quotation from Lewis Mumford.² Dickson had spent the war years working in Africa, where, as a British army officer, he was given the task of shoring up support for the side of the allies among the British colonies in Africa. At the time there was fear that the war would expand into Africa, either by moving further south from the area north of the Sahara or as a result of a Japanese incursion into the continent. Dickson, like many other idealistic young men of the time, was struck by the social cohesion of many of the communities that he visited, and his sense that western education, while bringing obvious and undeniable advantages with it, was actually undermining that cohesion by reducing the spirit of self-help that he found

¹ New York: Harcourt Brace, 1940.

² A. G. Dickson, “Technical Assistance and Idealism,” *Year Book of World Affairs* 12 (1958): 199-225. On Dickson’s work generally, see Alec Dickson, *A Chance to Serve* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1976), and Mora Dickson, *Portrait of a Partnership* (New York: International Partnership for Service-Learning, 2004).

to be alive in subsistence communities, replacing it with an individualistic spirit of self-promotion among the educated. The African experience led Dickson to a lifetime's search for reciprocity – for ways of combining collective responsibility with individual advancement, for using education to promote community improvement. Arguably, the history of Africa from Dickson's day to our own bears his observation out: we have replaced one way of life with another, not by melding the best of both but by obliterating the one to replace it with the other.

VSO was born of a happy concatenation of circumstances. British universities were undergoing massive pressure from a surge of applications. While the country's still rather meager resources were going into the founding and building of new universities to accommodate the postwar generation, these institutions were not yet in operation. The universities, loath to lose the talent that was presented to them and eager to develop long-term plans for accommodating them, accepted many students with a one-year delay. Thus was born the phenomenon of the gap year – the year between high-school and college that increasing numbers of students today are opting for here in the United States. The original VSO grew out of Dickson's work in Nigeria, Ghana, Sarawak, and Iraq. In all four locations he had worked with local youth to create programs that combined education with practical work in communities. His beliefs were rooted in what may seem to us old-fashioned notions about the dignity of work, about the spark of idealism in young people that can be harnessed for good, and about the joy of the physical that is so much a part of the way in which young people look at the world. Today we are all too eager to regard with skepticism the energy of young people, to label their idealism as naïve, or as something to be manipulated or exploited or marketed. Dickson's view of education was muscular: he believed in the virtues of such programs as Outward Bound, developed in Britain in the 1930s by the German-born educator Kurt Hahn.

Fundamental to VSO in its early days was the belief that international assistance had to be reciprocal: it was essential that young people learn from their experience, not just how to deliver help but also how to organize their own lives around models that they discovered through their foreign experience. Dickson also dreamed of a time when VSO would be bi-directional, with young people coming to Britain to engage in volunteer service, just as young people were going from Britain to other countries. He tried to interest the British Government in the idea, but, while he did gain some support from industry, the attention of the British was elsewhere, and the idea of sending groups of eager ex-schoolboys to distant parts of the world during a period of decolonization held little appeal.³

But VSO caused sufficient stir and was sufficiently successful to attract the attention of the United States. In late 1960 and early 1961, three American universities sent delegations to Britain to look at VSO, all three of them under contract to the United States Government. In 1961 President John F. Kennedy launched the Peace Corps. Dickson was invited to Washington to provide advice and counsel, an invitation that he accepted with alacrity. But while he was impressed and exhilarated by the American effort, he was concerned that it supplemented rather than reinforced American education: Peace Corps volunteers learned the virtues of service, to be sure, but their experience was not regarded as an educational effort, but rather as an attempt to apply American expertise to problems in other countries.

³ Only several years later, after Dickson had left the organization to found Community Service Volunteers, did the British Government begin to put significant funding into VSO.

Even as the Peace Corps was getting established, study abroad was emerging as an important element in American higher education. As William Hoffa⁴ makes clear in his history of study abroad, Americans have been going abroad for study since the nineteenth century and even before. There have been institutions in this country that have made study abroad, particularly in languages, a prominent feature of their offerings. But it was really only in the 1960s and 1970s, in the period of rapid expansion of higher education opportunities in the United States, that study abroad became firmly established. To cite my own experience: when, in 1971, I was given responsibility for reorganizing the undergraduate curriculum at the University of Pennsylvania – a curriculum, like those of most institutions at the time, seriously out of line with the needs and aspirations of those passing through it – there were only very limited study abroad options, essentially run by individual departments. By the end of the 1970s, Penn was sending hundreds of students abroad every year, the program had its own office and staff, and the University's students were going on its own programs, on consortial programs, and on programs run by other institutions and organizations.

The arguments for sending students abroad, with which, as an advocate for such activity, I was well primed at the time, included the value of contact with another culture, the value of learning foreign languages in the places in which they were actually spoken, and the value of *living in*, rather than merely visiting, a foreign location. Among the criteria for approving programs were such considerations as the degree of integration with the host society (we were skeptical about the value of island programs) and the length of time spent abroad. Initially, most students went for an entire year, a few for a semester.

The sheer romance of foreign destinations was perhaps one of the least legitimate but most powerful selling-points for study abroad. Several universities began to invest heavily in real estate in other countries, setting up centers for study abroad and populating these centers with their own students. Raising money from donors seemed not to be a huge problem. Professors were sent to these centers to offer instruction, the courses that they offered were enough like courses on the home campus to merit easy approval by curriculum committees, and students returned to the United States convinced that they had been changed by the experience. For many, it was the most significant thing that happened to them during their undergraduate years.

As an idealistic educational reformer, I was concerned at some of these developments, principally by the fact that they did not address the need to adapt home structures to take the study abroad experience into account. It is all too easy to make alliances with those who misunderstand one's mission but can provide assistance in carrying it out. We do it all the time. As long as curriculum committees did not balk at our sending students abroad, why should people like me rock the boat by pointing out that we were aiming to make the student experience abroad fundamentally different from those that they underwent on the home campus? In fact, our goal was to change faculty as well as student behavior – to make our faculty members more sensitive to the need for international experience at a time when too many of them saw their disciplines and the footprint of those disciplines on the larger society in essentially American terms.

⁴ William W. Hoffa, *A History of U.S. Study Abroad: Beginnings to 1965* (Carlisle, PA: Forum on Education Abroad, 2007).

Across the way, other movements were afoot to break out of what many saw as the hidebound nature of American higher education. At the University of Pennsylvania we established a major in urban studies – an enterprise that had hitherto been regarded as the province only of graduate study and that was considered by many to be wildly cross-disciplinary and hence unsuited to the basic foundation in a single discipline that was regarded as the hallmark of American undergraduate education (and European higher education too, for that matter). We also participated in the national program University Without Walls. This was, of course, a time when VISTA and other Peace-Corps-like programs were being established as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, and when increasingly students were engaging in practical work in the communities that they were also studying. Service-learning, though it has a longer history, really entered the mainstream through these programs. Many faculty members were fighting a rearguard action against what they saw as the takeover of higher education by the radical left, failing to understand that the principal threat to higher education, then as always, lay in radical boredom. Sadly, no one seemed to be thinking about ways in which experiences such as the Peace Corps could be drawn back into higher education to inform the study abroad experience; nor were people considering how the breaching of the fortress of the academy by such programs as University Without Walls might have implications also for foreign study.

In the early 1980s I heard about a new effort in a somewhat surprising setting, Rockland Community College, that finally addressed this issue. It was the notion of applying service-learning, which was gradually gaining a foothold in higher education, to the study abroad experience by having students travel overseas for both study and community work, linked with one another through the Deweyan idea of reflection: reflection on practical experience in order to generate and test theory, and on theory in order to inform practical experience. In this regard, it went hand in hand with experiential learning, another child of the 1960s and 1970s, which suggested that experience could under certain circumstances be as educationally valuable as time spent occupying a seat in a classroom. While such a notion was labeled by many as hopelessly romantic or as the product of sloppy thinking and intellectual laziness, it was gaining increasing credibility among those who saw education as enjoyable rather than as a penance to repair the ruin of our first parents (as John Milton so memorably named it).

The Partnership for Service-Learning that emerged in the 1980s from the thinking of a few pioneers at Rockland soon gathered momentum. Alec Dickson, veteran of World War II, of youth mobilization efforts in the colonies, and of Voluntary Service Overseas, was an early counselor to the new effort. Students were soon heading off to semester-long and year-long experiences in foreign countries – Kenya, Jamaica, Ecuador, but also Britain. The Partnership took as part of its mission advocacy of service-learning in general, domestic as well as foreign, but its thrust was distinctly international. Later it changed its name to become the *International Partnership for Service-Learning* (www.ipsl.org).

There was one further ingredient to the heady mix of educational reform in the 1960s and 1970s, itself a by-product of the huge expansion of higher education during that period – the belief that the university was not an enclave cut off from the larger society but an institution within that society whose purpose was to think more broadly than the constraints of everyday life permitted and to do so in engagement with the larger society. Universities, in short, were not monasteries

but ministries, not places of retreat but places of engagement. Civic engagement became the watchword of the movement to convince universities to shoulder their social responsibilities. It gained credibility both from the increased diversification of the population of universities, no longer the province of a single race or a single income group, and from the need to raise money from reluctant state legislatures and from increasingly socially aware philanthropists. One of the outcomes of this effort was Campus Compact, an alliance of university presidents to engage their institutions more directly with their communities. The institutions involved in Campus Compact at its founding were major institutions across the country, inspired by the spirit of the 1960s and 1970s, but perhaps also eager to demonstrate their commitment in order to maintain their positions as leaders (www.compact.org).

Study abroad, meanwhile, was expanding – from thousands to tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of American students going abroad each year. The focus was on Europe, and particularly on Britain, France, Germany, and Spain. There had always been American expatriate communities in those countries – especially in Paris and London (as a British undergraduate I spent many happy days in Paris swapping experiences with American students and persuading them to buy me drinks) – but with the arrival of large-scale study abroad, these populations expanded to such huge proportions that it was possible for an American to spend much of his or her time inside a kind of American cocoon. On the home front, we continued to insist that study abroad was life-changing, that Americans returned home more culturally aware, more willing to challenge received assumptions, and more open to international engagement, but the closed nature of American study abroad made us increasingly uneasy. Furthermore, time spent abroad was getting shorter. When numbers were small and interest was limited, the mavericks found their way to study abroad, but as the numbers increased, the less risk-averse found themselves trying to make choices between commitments to athletics and study abroad, or the rigors of demanding majors and study abroad. The unwillingness of curriculum committees to adapt to accepting as equivalents courses radically different from those on the home campus had an effect on program design, which often mirrored that at home. Globalization was also leaving its mark. Although more and more students were venturing beyond Europe – a trend that continues today – the world was simply growing more homogenized. Study abroad was no longer a once-in-a-lifetime visit to a foreign country, but just one in many visits, and often not the first. Soon the advent of computers and cell phones brought with it the phenomenon of instant connectivity, and higher education as a whole became less and less an effort by a young person to strike out on his or her own and more and more a communal effort by the entire family. The ideal of an experience utterly different from the experiences of home, in an environment wholly cut off from home, was as elusive as ever, and enjoyed by a number of Americans as tiny as it ever was. Study abroad became an industry – an industry large enough to attract the attention of legislators and attorneys general previously preoccupied with the pharmaceutical industry or banking or meat-packing.

In the process, we have lost something, or rather never found it. Study abroad was always an extension of the American classroom, an attempt to annex the foreign experience as a part of the educational enterprise. In itself, such an effort is, and always has been, admirable: young people need to understand the larger world, and there is no better way of doing so than by experiencing it, fully and in-depth. But there are dangers. Eager to provide our youth with experiences that are safe, wholesome and educationally sound, we reproduce experiences abroad similar to those

at home; far from maximizing difference, we minimize it. Indeed, there is a constant risk that study abroad will come, or has already come, to resemble the colonial experience: we view foreign cultures from what one critic has called the verandah – distanced, sheltered, and in easy communication with the folks back home. In this foreign setting, students look for the same living conditions as they enjoy back home, the same privileges, the same treatment by their home institutions. Indeed, they are even willing to take us to court for it.

Furthermore, students are going for shorter and shorter periods – pieces of foreign study wedged between fall and spring semesters, or tucked into a corner of the summer. Study abroad is changing from residence to trip, from immersion to dipping a toe in the water. The numbers of students going abroad are increasing, but at the expense of the time spent abroad. If we were to measure the actual number of days spent studying abroad annually by all American students, we might find that it is not much changed: there are simply more students going for less time. Can we be sure that in this process we are actually changing lives for the better? Can we be sure that we are not merely reinforcing stereotypes, merely perpetuating a particular kind of colonialism?

In suggesting that we are engaged in annexing the foreign experience, I chose my verb deliberately: the world has become our classroom, appropriated for the purpose of improving the lives of our students and furthering their education. Classrooms are empty spaces until you fill them with students: we, as educators, all too frequently, regard the world itself as an empty space, created for our educational convenience. We do not interact with it: we merely occupy it. We pay little attention or concern to our host countries as we design experiences for our students abroad: we put pressure on our partners in other countries to teach in the ways we are accustomed to, to grade in ways that are comprehensible to Americans, to fit *their* education programs to *our* needs. Such efforts are a small part of a much larger international effort in which American ways of delivering higher education are gaining ever wider acceptance. Study abroad, as we have conceived it in undergraduate education, is a fundamentally American concept, essentially unknown in the educational systems of any other country – at least until the last few years. Students from other countries study abroad, of course, but not normally on special programs designed for their convenience.

I am not suggesting that all, or even most, American study abroad experiences are equally compromised: there are numerous laudable programs, particularly those that allow for maximum immersion in another culture, those that offer field-based experiences, and the like. They tend to emphasize things that cannot be done at home, experiences that are different from US experiences. Nor can we ignore the astounding flexibility of American higher education that makes so many options available to our students. But the landscape of study abroad as a whole can seem depressing. Recognizing that study abroad, conducted responsibly and with due consideration both for the student and the host country, can be enormously beneficial, we have tended to expand that belief in positive outcomes to all kinds of less educationally salubrious activities, to all kinds of compromise and improvisation. Wishing to prove to funders that all study abroad experiences are good, we make false or unsupported claims about their benefits even in programs that seem to achieve very little.

It is here that service-learning enters the picture. International service-learning can give meaning to the study abroad experience. It can also answer those who worry about the ethics of study

abroad and the exploitation of other societies, since it aims to give something back. While it is difficult to do well, it can certainly add an additional option to a study abroad program. Furthermore, it promises a level of engagement with a foreign society that is difficult to achieve in conventional study abroad. Many of the international or global service-learning programs that we offer are presented to our students as essentially hands-on study abroad experiences. While we look for worthy partners, whom we can trust and who will do right by our students, we may not always think too hard about what our students are actually doing – whether the service that they are performing is contributing in meaningful ways to the betterment of the societies in question, and whether that service can be measured in meaningful ways. I do not discount the extreme importance of creating for our students transformative experiences, experiences in which they will learn and adapt and in which they will question received values. I do not discount the importance of the contained destabilization that such programs offer our students as they are forced to step out of their privileged status and grapple with real-life problems. But it is the *students* we talk about, the *students* whose lives we are aiming to transform, the *students* who must benefit. The *service* that they offer is, we feel, better than no service at all – a net gain for the communities where it occurs. And that, we feel, is all that need concern us.

And that is the picture of service-learning embedded in the study abroad paradigm. It is different from customary study abroad in its destabilization, in its questioning of values, but that is about all. It uses fundamentally the same delivery systems, is based on fundamentally the same academic procedures, works basically the same way, as all other study abroad. Of all study abroad models, we might argue, it does the least harm – but does it do the most good?

As we come to the end of this conference, I would like to argue for a different approach to international or global service-learning, one that separates it from the study abroad model and moves it in the direction of the mobilization of young people around urgent global issues. Under the study abroad model, we work at putting service into learning; but what about the possibility of putting learning into service? Lewis Mumford wrote in 1940 of “sleepwalking” young Americans – young people going through the motions with no particular sense of direction. Eighteen years later, in 1958, we witnessed the first stirrings of the commitment of young people in Britain and the United States to a new ideal of internationalism that led to VSO and the Peace Corps. That internationalism was undone by the outdated political thinking of their elders, but for a brief moment the possibility of achieving significant global gains seemed present.

If Mumford had written fifty years later, so in 1990 instead of 1940, he might well have described the young people of America as “sleepwalking,” focused narrowly on themselves, devoid of idealism. Survey after survey at that time told us that students thought first of themselves and were bored by political action. But now, eighteen years later (and fifty years after the founding of VSO), there are plenty of indications that that is changing, that our young people are waking up to the importance of social action and political engagement. This may be a new moment to mobilize and give purpose to a new idealism.

One small but significant indication of an institutional response to such mobilization is the recent announcement by Princeton University that it plans to fund a gap year program offering incoming undergraduates the option of deferring admission for a year in order to participate in a fully-funded program of community service abroad. While most institutions lack the resources

to support a program similar to Princeton's, this may be the first indication of a more serious approach to the gap year by American universities, and a kind of legitimization of taking time out between high school and college to do something useful in the world.

Skeptics may suggest that seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds lack the maturity and the skills to perform useful roles abroad. They may argue that letting thousands of young Americans loose to do good on a weary world would do more damage to our image than keeping them at home. To that I have two responses. The first is to point to the Lincoln Commission, that wants us to increase the number of American students going abroad fivefold, to a million students a year. Before we swamp the world with the largest intercontinental frat party ever seen (even without a fraternity blood drive to accompany it), perhaps we need to organize ourselves to channel that energy, and those numbers, in fruitful directions. Secondly, and far more importantly, we need, perhaps more than ever before, to counter the cynicism of our acquisitive society, to limit the material aspirations of our young people and harness the idealism that is putting forth new shoots even as we speak. I would argue that this task is urgent.

But that idealism should be an international, not to say global, idealism, cutting across institutions, and countries, and entire continents. It must provide new outlets for the energies of the young people of nations afflicted with youth unemployment at levels of fifty or sixty percent or more; its mobilization must be funded internationally and led internationally; it must adopt models that are not exclusively European and that stress reciprocity; and it must be centered on dealing with the chronic problems of our societies in meaningful ways. Perhaps it is beyond us to achieve such a worldwide mobilization of young people around worthy goals. But we could certainly do more than we are doing now.

We could start by dusting off the Millennium Development Goals. Approved by the heads of state gathered at the UN in the year 2000, these eight goals have timetables and targets attached to them running through the year 2015. The eight goals are as follows:

- eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- achieve universal primary education
- promote gender equality and empower women
- reduce child mortality
- improve maternal health
- combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- ensure environmental sustainability
- develop a global partnership for development

While progress on the achievement of these goals has not been satisfactory, it has also not been negligible – even on the part of the United States. But much more, obviously, needs to be done. Why not dedicate ourselves, as service-learning educators, to doing our part to achieve these goals, indeed by insisting that our programs be focused in that direction? Why not call on the heads of our institutions to come together, in a kind of worldwide Campus Compact, to endorse the goals and mobilize their institutions round their fulfillment? Why not call on these leaders to work with us to devise ways of bringing young people from many countries together in common activities for the fulfillment of the goals? Why not make international service-learning international not only in its reach but also in its participation? Why not open up lines of communication with non-academic volunteer organizations across the world to explore how our pedagogy and our academic connectedness can help?

I am not arguing for an abandonment of the careful assessment of our work, for the honing of our objectives, for the reasoned debate that has characterized this conference. I am not suggesting that we abandon our slightly counter-cultural flavor, our desire to change pedagogical practices. I am simply suggesting that, lest we too be accused of sleepwalking, we wake up to the power to do good that is contained in our pedagogies and in those on whom our pedagogies are practiced. We are but scratching the surface of the mountain. Above all, we need new and flexible models for the delivery of service and learning, and for combining reflection and action to achieve not only student change but also community change.

“The obligation to give assistance,” wrote Alec Dickson fifty years ago, “is indisputable. But let us consider what help is really needed; what it is that we have to give; how best it may be given; how those assisted may, in turn, give to others; and what we ourselves need to be ready to receive.”⁵ I think that last point is important: we too must be ready to change and to learn. At this conference we have talked off and on about global citizenship. Only the supremely self-confident can contemplate the notion of global citizenship, and such self-confidence is in itself a disqualification. Rather than worrying about what global citizenship actually is, perhaps we need to recognize how so much of the world’s population is trapped in a cycle of hopelessness – a cycle that generates only destabilizing hostility and despair. Perhaps we need to contemplate the many who are denied any kind of citizenship at all, let alone global citizenship. Perhaps we need to recognize that unless we ourselves change our ways we will lose our spirits at the rapidly approaching boundaries of material acquisition and consumption. Perhaps we need to recognize that we ourselves are falling prey to fear. At our next conference let us look forward to hearing not only how we are serving our students better but also how we have improved the lives of those they serve and how we have mobilized the resources of our institutions to do still more on their behalf. The moment, I repeat, is right.

⁵ “Technical Assistance and Idealism,” p. 225