Strategies to Mitigate the Negative and Accentuate the Positive Impacts of International Service-Learning on Host Communities
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Abstract
International service-learning can have a transformative effect on student participants, but little research has been done on the impact of these experiences on host communities. The authors make the case that an emphasis on intentional personal, cultural, and group preparation is imperative to have the best possible impact on both the student and host community. Overarching strategies include: 1) preparing students for their experience prior to departure from both an individual and group development perspective; 2) designing reflection activities and discussions that include members of the host community; 3) facilitating open conversations about equitable relationships, international perspectives of Americans, and potential negative effects the group could have on the host community; 4) providing opportunities for post-travel dialogue and personal action plans for re-engaging with the local community upon return. The authors draw from both theoretical frameworks and many years of experience traveling abroad with students to underpin the strategies outlined in this article.

As campuses across the nation increase their capacity for study-abroad opportunities, administrators are including ‘global citizenship’ within their campus-wide strategic plans and asking campus units to offer engaging opportunities to achieve this important goal. Global citizenship can be defined as a moral and ethical disposition which may guide an individual or groups’ understanding of local and global contexts and their responsibilities within different communities (“Ethics, Leadership & Global Citizenship,” n.d., para. 1). Global citizenship develops through a complex set of commitments to local interests and a sense of universal equality and notions of care for human beings, the Earth, and the world in its entirety. Global
citizenship, as participatory action, entails a responsibility for alleviating local and global inequality, while simultaneously avoiding action that hinders the well-being of individuals or damages the world.

International service-learning logically combines two aspects of experiential learning in an internationalized curriculum designed to educate globally competent students and global citizens: service-learning and study abroad. When designing global engagement opportunities, there are many travel and group related considerations that need to be taken into account before, during, and after taking a student group abroad. Before taking students to serve with and/or conduct research with people and communities on other continents, group leaders should carefully consider the impact that students will have on the places they visit. Overarching strategies to mitigate the negative and accentuate the positive include: 1) preparing students for their experience prior to departure from both an individual and group development perspective; 2) designing reflection activities and discussions that include members of the host community; 3) facilitating open conversations about equitable relationships, international perspectives of Americans, and potential negative effects the group could have on the host community; 4) providing opportunities for post-travel dialogue and personal action plans for re-engaging with the local community upon return.

In a recent study on short-term faculty led programs, many faculty leaders reported that they had given little or no thought to the negative impacts that their groups have (or could have) had on the host culture. While some faculty in the study acknowledged thoughts about negative economic issues that result in inequity or dependency in host communities, many did not consider the myriad of socio-cultural impacts that a large group can have on almost any place they visit (Schroeder, Wood, Galiardi, and Koehn, 2009). While there is no way to entirely eliminate such negative consequences (other than making the decision to stay home), it is important to consider how you can mitigate these potential problems when planning and implementing your program. As examined by Wood, et al (see this Partnerships issue), cultural, economic and even human rights concerns should be considered by the group leaders. While there are many potential ways of addressing these concerns, we believe a very powerful tool is the establishment and management of group dynamics.

**Establishing Positive Group Dynamics Through Individual & Group Development**

When taking a group outside of a classroom environment, whether it’s across the street to the local homeless shelter or across the globe to South Africa, the faculty leader(s), students, and community members will greatly benefit from positive and healthy group dynamics. Taking a group abroad is a significant challenge that many faculty members are hesitant to take on, in part because they can lose ‘control’ of the group when they are not operating within the confines of their classroom walls. The authors assert that establishing a healthy group dynamic is perhaps the single greatest factor in reducing negative impacts on the host community, thus
the faculty leader(s) should focus on intentionally creating a positive, caring, conscientious, intellectually and culturally curious, and sensitive team of students.

In 2008, the authors collaborated on a study to gauge the opinions of host communities on short-term international service-learning programs. We asked program leaders to interview key informants in the host communities about the impact that student groups had made in their opinion. Recognizing the limitations of such a study, a common thread emerged. The general opinion of key informants was that if the group dynamic was ‘good,’ then that almost always led to a good influence on the community; if the group dynamic was ‘bad’ then the influence could be damaging. More specifically, some comments were directed toward group leaders, indicating that group leadership was the single-most important aspect of the group – everything follows from the tone of the leader. If host community members are telling us that the leader essentially ‘makes or breaks’ the behavior of the group, then it is our responsibility to heed this directive and put into place strategies to create healthy group dynamics. This project led us to affirm that not only is group development key for a positive experience in and among group members, it is essential for a healthy relationship of mutual respect with the host community.

Understanding the way groups develop and grow is vital for formulating an intentional response to both positive and negative group dynamics. “Groups go through a number of phases or stages if they exist for an extended period. It is clear, for example, that people tend to want to know something about the other members; have to develop a degree of interdependence in order that the group or team may achieve its tasks and be satisfying to its members; and has to learn at some level to deal with conflict if it is to survive” (Smith, 2005). Tuckman and Jensen (1977) stated that groups tend to move through the following five stages: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. There are no definitive time frames for each stage, as groups are unique and will progress through the stages differently. Group leaders should prepare for each stage and be intentional about their response. From the authors’ perspectives, a group and the community they interact with may benefit from engaging in some intentional norming activities, before the traditional norming stage typically occurs, in an effort to minimize the negative impact that storming could have on a host community.

Within each of Tuckman and Jensen’s stages we provide an explanation of what to expect, as well as some suggestions to prepare for and deal with both group and individual needs to mitigate the negative and accentuate the positive impacts on host communities. Many of these suggestions were provided by ‘seasoned’ group leaders who have given students the opportunity to learn and serve in an international setting (NCCC International Service-Learning Institute, roundtable discussion, February 20, 2007), in addition to the authors’ own suggestions that have grown out of the challenges and successes we have had with the group development process over the past decade.
While faculty members have expertise in a particular discipline, they are not necessarily trained in or comfortable with group development initiatives and facilitating reflection discussions. Initiating the conversations and strategies outlined below will put an emphasis on developing a ‘team’ before your departure – the type of group mindset needed for group travel. This will not only make for more powerful student learning within the structure of a safe and supportive sub-community, but it will also emphasize respect for the local host community and culture.

**Pre-Travel Stage**

“The forming stage of development is when the team building initially occurs and trust is established” (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998, p.168). Participants are getting to know each other and begin exploring boundaries by “building open, trusting relationships that value inclusion” (Ibid). Group members are often excited, tentative, or a combination of both. Leaders should allow this forming process to happen naturally by meeting off-campus in a commonly known location such as a local restaurant, park, or your home. A non-classroom setting will allow for natural group bonding and will set the stage for learning to happen in informal environments. Be sure to engage the group in some get-to-know-you activities before launching into your expectations, the course syllabus, and in-country itinerary.

Establishing a group ‘norm’ or spoken and unspoken values/rules are usually the most salient functions of the norming stage. “At this stage, individuals in the group deal with both intimacy and identity. Members of the group begin to understand the group’s culture” (Ibid, 169). By approaching this norming with intentionality before departure, the program leader can impart some ‘control’ over this process while also including participants’ voices and opinions. An additional advantage to including norming exercises at this point is to minimize the storming stage that naturally occurs within all groups. Some examples of how to accomplish this are listed below.

**Group Needs: Promoting Positive Forming and Norming**

✔ More than your basic icebreakers and get-to-know-you activities, group development and challenge is a must! The more students get the opportunity to do group work (e.g., do service together as a group, prepare a group presentation/activity, participate in challenging situations and team-building activities, etc.) before you go, the better the group will deal with challenging situations during the international experience.

✔ Invite students who have been on the program and/or international students from the host country to help prepare your group for their experience – host a panel discussion, followed by a dinner, to create an open space for informal conversation.

✔ Develop a group covenant to set the tone for group and individual expectations. Answering questions together such as, “How are we going to act toward one another?” and “How does our group need to function in order to have the best experience possible?” will generate a list of expectations for the group and each other as individuals. Additional
prompt questions can include, “How will the community members know we are interested in their culture?” and “How will you show respect to each other and the community?” Though it takes more time, this process is far more beneficial than simply giving students a list of your behavioral expectations. Participants are often more willing to follow the rules they establish than those established by the program leaders, and they are often more rigorous than anything you will come up with on your own. As one program leader astutely stated, “The more I stay out of it, the more the students are engaged.”

✓ This covenant then needs to be a central piece of your experience while in the host country. Often a follow-up piece to this discussion is “How can we keep this alive?” The group generally answers with items such as doing in-country group check-ins, giving everyone a copy, and other suggestions that personalize it to the group and make it lively and useful (e.g., naming the covenant). In this way, the students are giving permission to use this regularly in reflection discussions throughout the trip, and it is then the responsibility of the faculty member to ensure this group agreement stays part of the continual conversation. Be sure to give each student a copy of it -- make luggage tags out of it and/or prominently display the covenant on something that you can post in a common location while you are in the host community.

✓ Take time to ask the students what they will contribute to the group in terms of gifts / skills / attributes. Similar to the covenant, ask students to engage in both written and verbal reflection about these named qualities: Have they seen other students contribute these qualities? Have they personally enacted them?

✓ Conversely, ask students to name a challenge or a weakness (either one from the group covenant or something they struggle with daily that could affect the group), and then ask the group to hold each other accountable and help each other grow. This encourages a student to view the weakness as a challenge that each student can work to improve; and provides a potential opportunity for someone else’s strength to ‘shine’ as they support each other (e.g., someone who needs structure and order can benefit from watching another student who’s strength is flexibility in changing circumstances).

✓ Provide the participants with a reading about how a community may be negatively affected by a group that was intending to ‘do good,’ and ask them to discuss it. This discussion may heighten their awareness of this issue and elicit some ideas that they can take with them into the host community.

✓ Discuss the idea of ‘being American’ and the political baggage we carry as citizens of the U.S. To prepare students for the common question, “What is America like?,” assign a reaction paper to answer this seemingly simple question and devote a full-hour to discuss their answers, as well as how you can overcome negative stereotypes such as ‘the ugly and loud American.’ You may also ask participants, “How did the region you grew up in affect your values and assumptions?” Along with these thought-provoking questions, it is important to discuss appropriate attire while in the host community, how people may view high-end travel gear, fancy electronics, etc. Many Americans take these things for granted, but are seen as a symbol of extreme privilege when traveling abroad.
Strategies to Mitigate the Negative and Accentuate the Positive Impacts

✔ Use awareness projects to engage your campus and home community in your experience abroad. By making your international program more visible back home, you may ‘raise the stakes’ regarding expected behavior, thus creating a positive influence on individual / group behavior when in the host community.

✔ Discuss alcohol availability and how your group is going to handle it. In many countries, students are of legal age and it can quickly become a problem if there is no oversight or expectation. Discuss when this is appropriate and what is appropriate. As with the group covenant, group conversations and decisions are generally stronger and carry more positive peer pressure than ‘rules’ imposed by the faculty member. Because alcohol is a leading factor in student groups attracting negative attention in a host community, be advised that this particular conversation is critical for group success. In interest sessions, it is not too early to lay the groundwork from the very beginning by stating, “This is not a party trip.”

Consider this scenario: One faculty member commented, “I knew I was in trouble when we got to the airport at 10:30a.m. and three of my students bellied up to the airport bar.” After this incident, he continued to ignore alcohol as a factor in his program until it was too late, embarrassing him, the students, and the university. Worse, the host community was subject to the poor behavior of members of the group. This can almost entirely be avoided with a group conversation ahead of time, or at least gives you something to fall back on should a problem arise.

Individual Needs: Promoting Positive Forming and Norming

✔ Minimize culture shock. Some cultural shock is good, but too much can cause students to shut down emotionally until they go home. While a student may never fully grasp the culture of another country before experiencing it first-hand, you can make your best attempt to lessen the potential stress. Provide detailed descriptions or show a movie about what life is like in the host country. Ask them to reflect on the times that they have lived without their daily ‘creature comforts,’ without their friends/partners/parents, been in uncomfortable and physically challenging situations, etc. Prepare them for the reality of day-to-day life the best that you can.

✔ Prepare both Caucasian students and students of color/GLBT for how people may react to them. For instance, if they are Caucasian, have them reflect on how the color of their skin may automatically cause the host community to assume they have a higher level of privilege. If they self-report as GLBT, have them reflect on how the culture may/may not accept open sexuality. How will they reconcile their human rights with cultural values of their host country? Ask them to continue this reflection process while abroad, too.

✔ Encourage students to become physically active before traveling, as many international service-learning experiences are very physically demanding. Most students typically drive everywhere, but in some other countries, they will have to do a lot of walking / hiking to get around. Also, service projects can be very demanding and may take a good deal of energy. Make sure the students understand this and encourage them to get in the best...
possible physical/mental shape that they can. Constant complaining about the heat, long days, traveling by foot, etc. can make the host community feel inferior or inadequate if students are obviously uncomfortable or annoyed.

✔ Appeal to different learning styles and intelligences, and offer pre-trip assignments that balance music, film, books, academic articles, travel literature. Create a must-read/listen/watch list of two books, two musicians, two films, two visual artists from the host country. The list of two’s distills this assignment down to a manageable amount of work and allows you to incorporate what they learned into in-country reflection exercises. The more they know about the culture before they go, the more prepared they will be to engage in intellectually stimulating dialogue with community members and the more culturally aware/sensitive they will become. The host community will benefit from having their culture recognized by the students even if the students do not fully understand it.

Offer opportunities for both the internal and external processors in your group to excel. Balance group discussion with journaling and reaction papers. Engage in reflection activities that offer opportunities for different learning styles, including drawing, poetry, etc. Starting this process before you travel will encourage participants to engage in reflection with community members, too.

**During the Experience**

During a powerful international service-learning experience, group members will have different reactions to what they are experiencing. The group’s dynamic can have a positive or negative impact on these experiences. For some, the experience can be transformative in their global awareness and understanding of different cultures. This type of response can have a significantly positive impact on the group and the community being served. Conversely, other group members may be overly challenged and begin to shut down and/or act out. This type of a response can have a damaging impact on the group and the community. How the group leader(s) handle these different types of reactions can be the key to the success of the group and ultimately have a large effect on the impact of the community.

While many new group leaders are prepared to deal with the stages discussed above, it is often the next stage (storming) that can have long term negative effects if not handled in an appropriate and timely fashion. During this stage, individual personalities, values, opinions, beliefs, and idiosyncrasies emerge. Participants may argue, retreat in silence, lose enthusiasm for the project, shirk their responsibilities, shut down emotionally, or ‘act out’ by breaking stated/unstated rules, being overly impatient or critical, becoming verbally hostile toward other group members, drinking excessively, forming cliques to the exclusion of others, competing for attention, complaining loudly, among others. “Storming may be a short process in which the group comes to pretty clear direction, or it can be destructive. Some groups establish such trust in each other and in their process that the storming process is resolved quickly.” Conversely, “some groups exist in this storming phase and develop adversarial models of
operating. They may depend on it so much that it becomes the way of getting their work done" (Komives et al., 1998, p. 169). Thus, if the group does not have an established set of guiding principles and strong communication skills, this stage can cause the group to breakdown and ultimately have a negative effect on the community they are serving. One seasoned faculty leader stated he “would sooner take a group into the backcountry without food than without guiding principles.” (Hutchison, D., personal communication, May 13, 2010).

It is for this reason that the authors assert the importance of introducing activities typically associated with the norming stage before departure. With these common principles in mind, the group has a common language, or agreement, to fall back on and can use these norms to engage in a rich discussion and positively proceed together as a cohesive group.

It is inevitable that the storming stage will happen to a greater or lesser degree depending upon the size, personality, length of time abroad, and preparation of the group; but, it is crucial that the group leaders not try to stop this stage from happening as it is a necessary process of moving toward a performing group. It is important to note that the group leader(s) need to serve as discussion facilitators and should not take critical comments too personally. This storming process can have a transformative impact on the participants and ultimately have a tremendously positive impact on the community they are serving.

The performing stage is the one for which all group leaders strive. “Built upon the strong foundation of the three previous stages, the group now cycles into a mature ‘stage of equilibrium’” (Komives et al., 1998, p. 170). It is during this stage that many group leaders wonder if they are still needed because the group is functioning smoothly on their own. The group members’ communication skills have improved -- they are able to wrestle with complex topics of discussion with little leader oversight, appreciate and draw upon the diversity of its members, and are often less concerned about themselves and more concerned about the health and safety of the group and their impact on the community. When one is less concerned about his/her own needs, one is able to look outward and focus on others’ needs. In this stage, they are focused on developing relationships with the community they are serving, which often allows them to have a transformative educational experience and ultimately have a very positive impact on the community.

Group Needs: To Work Through the Storming and Promote Continued Norming and Begin Performing

✔ Develop a strong personal rapport with the students. Do not set yourself apart from them. By eating, sleeping, working side-by-side with them, you will be more effective as a leader/faculty member of the course. It is important to note that this is a fine balance. You need to maintain your role of authority and leadership while establishing appropriate relationships with the students. Practice this each time you travel and know that you will get better at it each time you take a group abroad.

✔ Facilitate small and large group reflection discussions as often as possible, but it is important to go with the mood of the group! Forced reflections are seen as just that and
can create some resentment. Are the students ready to reflect, have they processed internally and externally? Create a seamless environment – the whole experience is a class. Chat over group dinners, while serving, in the van, sitting on the top of mountains, etc.

✓ Understand the range of potential transformation from the experience. Some students will be impacted and transformed in profound ways, while others will not. This does not, however, mean that they didn’t have an important learning experience; it simply means that they are in a different place developmentally and/or that transformative learning could happen later as a result of this experience. Provide a framework for the individuals and group to understand the wide range of his or her reactions / outcomes from the experience. Use this framework during reflection discussions / journals, etc.

✓ Other reflection ideas to deal with storming and promote performing:
  o Using index cards, ask students to write their reactions, issues, concerns, insights, successes, etc. onto a card, then pass them around so the whole group gets to read what each person wrote. If you are near a fire / wood stove, it is often productive to ceremoniously ‘burn’ any grievances, misunderstandings, or negative thoughts after they are shared.
  o Revisit the group covenant regularly and reward students for role modeling the group’s values. Try using the host country’s flag as a ‘cape of honor’ to symbolize the group covenant. Each night, the group can choose someone who exemplified one or more of the group values to receive the cape.
  o Revisit the personal strengths and weaknesses / challenges the group members named for themselves. Ask them to reflect on how they are doing both individually and as a group.
  o Collect all group member’s work boots / gloves and put them in the middle of a group circle. Have each student grab a pair different from their own and say something positive about the student who works in those boots / gloves.
  o Have participants close their eyes and listen to your voice as you take them back on a journey to when they first met as a group. Ask them to reflect on how the group has transformed. Be sure to compliment them on how far they have come as a group and ask them what they hope to learn, do, experience, etc. before they leave.

✓ Use a group journal to keep the group motivated and reflecting on their experience. Encourage words, poems, songs, pictures, word searches, drawings, etc. These reflections will allow students to use multiple ways of learning and will help them to communicate what they are experiencing in a less formal way. You may want to write some prompts in the group journal and/or ask your participants to do the same.

✓ Ask members of the host community to participate in reflections. This person or people could share with the students how they are experiencing the student’s visit. They could discuss the positive impact that the students are having and address any concerns about negative impacts. Revisit alcohol expectations if necessary. If this becomes a problem during the program, confront individuals about their behavior, but also engage the entire group in an open discussion. Positive peer pressure can have a much more profound effect than your anger or frustration with specific individuals.
Strategies to Mitigate the Negative and Accentuate the Positive Impacts

✓ Allow for the group to accept ‘outsiders’ into the group development throughout the experience. The people you work with at the project sites often want to be a part of your group – allow your group to invite others into your traditions, reflections, etc. This process can help continue to break down cultural barriers while also having a profoundly positive influence on the host community.

Individual Needs: To Work Through the Storming and Promote Continued Norming and Begin Performing
✓ Build in down-time – more than you think you need! As mentioned previously, the group can be both a support and challenge; but, introverts need some space. Encourage this publicly so that they don’t feel guilty for taking the time to take care of themselves. Encourage participants to take this time in the morning and evening. Participants who choose to sleep late or go to bed too early often miss out on some personal time to walk, read, reflect, etc. Make sure you get down time, too!
✓ Make time and space for individual check-ins / discussions. Some students need to chat with you, but won’t ask for your time because they think you are too busy. Walk or ride with them while headed to your next locations, sit next to them at dinner, offer your assistance, make it known that they are welcome to come find you during certain times of the day / evening.
✓ Dealing with ‘that’ person on the trip! Dealing with this during the beginning of the experience is the best way to handle it because their acting out will negatively affect the group and community. Be firm, yet supportive. Expect tears and frustration for awhile, but things are sure to settle out as they become more aware of their place in the group and the group begins to accept them a bit more. Check in with ‘that’ person frequently, too.

Preparing to Return Home
Preparing the group for the adjourning stage can make the last few days of the in-country experience a profound experience for everyone involved. “Adjourning involves dissolution. It entails the termination of roles, the completion of tasks and reduction of dependency” on each other (Smith, 2005). During this stage, we have found that students often act in one of two ways – they are either very excited about leaving so that they can get back to their creature comforts back home and/or get away from people they do not like, or they begin to ‘mourn’ the idea of leaving their new international friends and/or the group. Either can be stressful and when expressed either verbally or non-verbally, both can negatively affect the group dynamic and community. Listed below are some suggestions to promote positive, and often life-changing experiences, during the last few days of an international experience. Our suggestions focus on the group and community as a whole rather than on individual group members.
Strategies to Mitigate the Negative and Accentuate the Positive Impacts

- Minimize ‘exit fever’ among the group members. Keep them talking about the present, while acknowledging that some may be anxious to return home and are looking toward the future. On index cards, ask participants to write down three things they look forward to returning to and why they are important to them. Collect them and share them with the group (without naming names) and put them in ‘safe keeping’ during the last three days. Simultaneously, ask them to reflect on what life might be like if they had to live without them (specifically physical items such as computers, iPods, their comfortable bed, air conditioning, etc.), as their new friends in their host community may never have the opportunity to have such things at their disposal. This process accomplishes two things – opens the space for participants to remain present while simultaneously reflecting on their privilege.

- Provide multiple opportunities for closure with the group and with the host community. Involve host community members in planning these events / discussions/ ceremonies so that they receive what they want / need as well as including your group members’ needs. These experiences can range from inviting everyone to gather for a final dinner to a more formal certificate ceremony. Following the traditions of the local culture (as directed by tribal elders, the in-country host, etc.), thank the community for their time, opening their homes, their hospitality, and educating your group about their customs and traditions, etc. Express what an honor it was to learn from them while working on project(s) together and suggest that you would like to return for another visit, but only if you know you will actually do this within the next one to two years.

- Be sure to exchange personal information a few days ahead of your departure so that people aren’t scrambling at the last minute to gather addresses and emails. Ask about their preferred way to stay in touch. If participants do not intend to stay in touch, let them know that saying they will stay in touch, but not following through, can be very damaging to the long-term relationship with the community.

- Upon returning home, be sure to send a thank you letter (include signatures of your participants) to your in-country host(s), along with a photograph of the whole group (including community members), within two weeks.

Focusing on individual and group preparation before and during your short-term study abroad experience will allow students and faculty to share expectations, discuss issues of diversity and cultural expectations, get to know each others’ strengths / skills / weaknesses, set common goals, establish norms, and allow the group to move more quickly through the typical stages of group development. Does group development eliminate all aspects of unhealthy student behavior and its impact on the community? No. But, providing an open space for communication, conducting some diversity training and awareness activities, establishing a group covenant, taking the time for individual group reflection, and developing pre-travel strategies for dealing with negative behavior will help eliminate many of the potential problems, while lessening the negative impact on the host culture – not to mention making your job as the faculty leader much easier!
References


