*Chapter 5*

# INTERNATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING: A CALL TO CAUTION

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## Introduction

BOTH STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES in North America are increasingly interested in the global issue of poverty, and many want to *do* something. This desire combined with cheaper international airfares and growing disposable incomes in North America have contributed to an ever-increasing number of university sponsored service-learning trips to the "Third World."[1] Spring break, May term, and full semester programs attempt to combine both learning about and helping these poor countries. Students and professors travel the world, including countries as distant and distinct as Ecuador, Kenya, and Viet Nam to learn while building orphanages, painting health centers, and running after-school programs. What should we think of this growing trend? Are these experiences beneficial to both the students and the poor? Should such programs be expanded or cut back?

Unfortunately, the vast majority of the service-learning experiences, which I have witnessed in my fifteen years in Central America, neither understand nor address the true dilemmas of poverty and consequently provide little or no long-term benefit to the poor. They therefore result in learning that is mediocre at best. Students and professors are intruding into poor people's lives, often trying

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[1] I have put "Third World" in quotations in this first usage to make clear that I am aware and sympathetic with many of the arguments against using First/Third, Developed/Underdeveloped terminology. However, for ease of use and because it is the most common terminology, I will use Third World for the remainder of this paper.

to fix things they do not understand. This service often causes them to think better of themselves, worse of the poor, and makes them too busy to take full advantage of their learning opportunities. More importantly, this service based on superficial understanding seldom empowers the poor or builds up their capacity. It is often neither equitable nor sustainable. As a result, I will argue using development and service-learning literature and case studies that students must learn more before they seek to intervene in the lives of the poor, that this learning can be experiential even if it is not service-oriented, and that any learning experiences that seek to serve the poor must go through a process of review and evaluation to determine if it is truly contributing to the development of the poor.

## Development and Service-Learning

Development is about people. It is not about factories, computers, money, or tractors. These are but useful tools. They are means to an end but only means. True development is about transforming people, empowering them to change their own future—to make a better tomorrow for their children. The United Nations maintains that

> Development is not only a fundamental right but also a basic human need, which fulfills the aspiration of all people to achieve the greatest possible freedom and dignity both as individuals and as members of the societies in which they live (United Nations 1991).

Bryant and White in their classic text on development define it as "increasing the capacity of people to influence their own future," (Bryant and White 1982) and go on to outline four characteristics of a true development process. First, it must be empowering, increasing people's sense of control and power over decisions and events that affect them. Second, it must increase people's capacity—both their ability and their energy to determine their future. Third, it must be equitable—the benefits must not be concentrated on only a small sector of the population and especially not on its wealthier members. Finally, development must be sustainable. Development processes must be carried out in such a way that is sustainable by local economic, human, and environmental resources.

A Christian perspective on development, brings this focus on people and the importance of empowering the poor into sharper focus. Christ gave his disciples two commandments, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30-31, NIV). In this passage, by putting love of neighbor as one of the two summary commandments, Christ is demonstrating how important people are in his kingdom. In addition, he is challenging his followers to a radical type of love, especially for those in need,[2] which few if any have been able to attain. If Christians both value and put into practice this love of others, rich or poor, then our every interaction with others should be characterized by respect for their God-given and God-reflecting dignity. Second, loving others as ourselves means our seeing that they attain their God-given potential just as we attempt to. Finally, a Christian perspective on development should take seriously people's spirituality. While many nonreligious development organizations avoid or even minimize the faith of those they serve, Christian organizations should recognize the power of faith and spirituality to motivate and transform lives (Ver Beek 2000).

In summary, a Christian perspective on development reinforces the centrality of people and their God-given dignity. It is our responsibility to see that all people fully develop the talents and gifts they were given as well as the centrality of spirituality to many people's lives.

Service-learning is a term used to describe efforts that allow students to meet formal educational goals while at the same time improving themselves and their society. The Southern Regional Education Board program first used the term in the late 1960s. They defined it as "the integration of the accomplishment of a needed task with educational growth" (Kendall 1990). Robert Sigmon asserts that its purpose is "the linking of service with learning to create a congruent service ethic throughout the campus culture and within the curriculum (Sigmon 2000). Clearly, service-learning seeks to have students learn while they do something good, and, as a result, improve learning, pedagogy, and create better and more moral citizens.

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[2] See the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-36.

Robert Sigmon argues that the best of these service-learning opportunities have three characteristics in common: (1) "Beneficiaries"[3] define their needs, which are then linked to learning expectations for students. The individuals, communities, or agencies seeking assistance should define their needs and requests and then enter into dialogue with the professors and students to match their needs to student's interventions. (2) All involved are learners and teachers as well as servers and served. The students, professors, and beneficiaries should all be both contributing and benefiting from the relationships. (3) Students are challenged to both learn and contribute. They must respect the local knowledge and culture, listen and explore as well as share from their emerging capacity, and gain increased capacity for self-directed learning (Sigmon 2000).

A Christian perspective on service-learning largely complements the characteristics outlined above. I have already mentioned Christ's concern for our serving our neighbor and the poor. Such service, for a Christian, should not be a convenient addition to the curriculum but an integral part of each Christian's life—students, professors, and all others. The goal of service-learning in a Christian context goes beyond creating better citizens. Rather it is for us to become what God originally intended—to fulfill our calling by being loving neighbors. Christians should all be busy learning and acting to better transform this society into what God desires—"let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:24, NIV). Finally, as disciples of Christ, we need only reflect on his example as teacher to see service-learning in practice. Christ's original twelve disciples learned through Christ's teachings and modeling as well as by serving and reflecting on that service. In summary, a Christian perspective on service-learning is consistent with Christ's example, calls us to serve the poor and society in general, and sets the goal not at becoming better citizens but rather at fulfilling who we were created to become—loving servants who by giving, receive.

We can certainly imagine a setting where true development and true service-learning are taking place and complementing each other. Students would be serving and learning in ways that are empowering, capacity building, equitable, and sustainable. In practice, this would mean that the student

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[3] I use this term recognizing that it is problematic. In the best service-learning situation both the students and the "served" are learners and teachers. However, I know of no better term that captures the idea that the student is "serving" on various levels (individuals, communities, agencies).

intervention would encourage and allow the poor to define their needs, make decisions, and control the processes affecting their lives. The poor would learn new skills and feel increasingly motivated and empowered. New resources would complement but not overwhelm local ones, the poor in the community would benefit and the processes set in motion would be economically, humanly, and environmentally sustainable. The service-learner would contribute limited amounts of resources, ideas, and effort without diminishing local processes. The focus would be on learning from the poor, and recognizing the value of local knowledge, skills, and ideas. Finally, they would be culturally sensitive and knowledgeable about development in order to truly contribute to a development process in a manner that makes their hosts feel comfortable, intelligent, and motivated. After the students left, the community would say—"we did it ourselves."

After reviewing the above scenario, we can also imagine one where attempts to do development and service-learning are clearly in conflict. Students would be serving in ways that disempower, do not build local capacity, and are neither equitable nor sustainable, and, as a result, both their service and learning would be deficient. In practice this would mean that the students and their leaders would be the ones defining the agenda, making the decisions, controlling the processes, and learning new skills. The students would be predominantly the teachers, using and building their knowledge, skills, and ideas. Their resources would overwhelm local ones; benefits would not be distributed equitably; and the processes they set in motion would not be economically, humanly, or environmentally sustainable with local resources. The students would focus on serving the poor with their own knowledge, skills, and ideas rather than learning from them. In this scenario, the poor are primarily the learners and the served. After this type of service, the poor would feel less powerful and not in control of their future. Their knowledge, skills, resources, and ideas would have been marginalized by the students and leaders who were neither culturally nor developmentally aware of the impact of their actions and decisions. After they left, the community would state—"they did it for us."

Regrettably, in my experience, many service-learning experiences that seek to help the poor fall closer to the second description than to the first. I agree with Harkavy who asserts that

> the service learning movement has not "rightly placed" the goal. It has largely been concerned with advancing the civic consciousness and moral

character of college students, arguing that service learning pedagogy results in improved teaching and learning. Although service to the community is obviously an important component of service learning, *it does not focus on solving core community problems* (italics mine). (Harkavy, 1996)

I join Harkavy in calling for service-learning that, while not ignoring the needs of students and professors, instead focuses on creating an empowering and healthy development process for those it is seeking to serve. The following are two contrasting case studies that will exemplify two different types of international service-learning.

## Case Studies

In October of 1998, Hurricane Mitch spent six days destroying much of Honduras. The hurricane was followed by a flood, not of water, but of very well-intentioned groups who came to Honduras to help. Many of these groups were college students and their professors coming down during their breaks or after classes were finished for service-learning.[4] Honduras has long been a top destination for international service-learning, the hurricane just increased the flow. Honduras is attractive to groups both because of its poverty and its accessibility. Over the last fifteen years in Central America, I have seen hundreds of service-learning groups come and go. I will present below two case studies to examine some of the issues involved.

### "We Came to Serve"

After the hurricane, an engineering professor from a Christian university asked one of his classes to design a house for hurricane victims in Honduras. At the end of the semester, those who were able would fly down to Honduras and build their house for a family.[5] A simple $4,000 house was designed, and a group of

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[4] While many of these trips are not called service-learning experiences, they fit most common definitions of service-learning, in that participants attempt to provide some service to the community in which they work and at the same time attempt to learn something about the country, culture, and society in which they are serving.

[5] These two case-studies are compilations of the experiences of various groups, however, all of the experiences cited did actually happen. I have attempted to be as even-handed in

twenty students had some orientation meetings to discuss what to bring, what the country was like, learn a little Spanish, and so forth. The group also raised the $30,000 from family and friends to cover their expenses and the cost of the house they would build. The professor contacted a friend who was a missionary in Honduras and who agreed to select an appropriate area and family to receive the house. In their two-week stay in the south of Honduras, the group almost finished the house, working with the assistance of three Hondurans who had lost their jobs because of the hurricane. A local church was paying them $3 a day to rebuild and repair houses. When the group returned home, they told us that they were overwhelmed by the immensity of the destruction, impressed by the hard-working Hondurans, and a little frustrated by how little they had accomplished. They all agreed with the woman who said, "I have so many questions. I wished we would have seen and learned a little more about the rest of Honduras."

When I later visited the family who had received the house, they were extremely grateful to the group for such a wonderful gift. The house was well-built and larger than that of most of their neighbors. Their only complaint was that they would have rather had fewer but bigger bedrooms since the children usually all slept together. However, while I was talking to their pastor, he said that two of the family's neighbors were not speaking with them because they felt they had been more deserving of the house. Some in the community were also upset because the group had mostly stuck to themselves, had brought down all their own food, and usually would not take the food or drinks they offered them. In addition, the students seeming amusement at the Hondurans' more simple building techniques had offended two of their Honduran coworkers. I tried to smooth the waters by explaining that the group had only had enough money to build one house and that they had probably stuck to themselves because they did not speak much Spanish. I also explained that they probably did not accept the food because they were afraid of getting sick and assured them that the group was not mocking their techniques but probably laughing in amazement at how much they could do without power tools.

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these compilations as possible. I know of many groups who served in ways that were even more destructive to a true development process than the one I relate here.

**"We Came to Learn"**

A second group of twenty college students from a Christian college planned to go to Honduras for a three-week class to try to better understand why Honduras was poor and what responsibility they held as Christians and global citizens in the face of that poverty. After they arrived, several of them shared that they felt embarrassed when people in the United States, who assumed they were coming to help, looked at them disapprovingly when they found out they were coming "*just* to learn." While in Honduras, the group did spend a day alongside a group of Hondurans, digging out a house in the south of Honduras—and their aching muscles convinced them of the enormity of the task. They also lived with Honduran families—learning firsthand about daily life, the culture, and the struggle to seek true development. These students were also able to learn about Honduran history and culture and about development theories that seek to explain Honduran poverty and possible solutions. They met Honduran leaders, including the president of the Honduran Congress and leading activists for the poor, and could ask for their perspectives on the hurricane and how to best help Honduras. Finally, they were able to visit almost a dozen communities that were devastated by the hurricane, and they were able to see and hear what the *community members* were doing, sometimes with the help of development organizations. At the end of their time, they were encouraged to continue learning and sharing with others what they had learned about Honduras, poverty, and development and to begin to act and support the development work of at least one of the organizations they visited.

After one of the one-day visits to a rural development project, the coordinator said he felt very blessed by their visit. He said it was the first time that a group had come to humbly listen to the people, visit their farms and houses, and see how their lives were changing, without some other agenda. He said he felt very encouraged by the fact that they cared enough to be willing to come "just to learn" from the people.

While these students also lamented that they had only been able to stay for three weeks, they seemed less frustrated with how they had used their time and what they had accomplished. One of the students wrote in her final evaluation, "I learned that in order to really help the poor we need to learn more—to understand the causes of the problems before we try to solve them. I also saw that there is hope—that God works through us and we can support and help

organizations that are changing the lives of the poor. I'm excited to go home and learn and do more."

## Issues to Consider

The definitions and characteristics of true development and true service-learning as well as the case studies demonstrate that it is possible although perhaps not uncomplicated to combine development and service-learning goals. I believe there are three issues that need to be addressed in all future attempts to do so: evaluating the impact on the poor, evaluating what students are learning, and finally concentrating on learning before serving.

### Evaluating the Impact on the Poor

The first, and perhaps the most important issue is whether a specific service-learning opportunity is truly developing and empowering those it is serving. This is the most important question because the service-learning experience is intruding into poor people's lives. Before considering the quality of the learning for students, we need to be relatively certain that our intervention will leave people better off, in developmental terms, than before. Universities have very clear standards for approving psychological experiments or for allowing social-work or psychology students to be involved in counseling settings. They need to be certain that the students are properly prepared, supervised, and evaluated to determine if the intervention will benefit or at least not harm the subjects. Universities can be held liable if they do not follow these standards. However, students and professors travel all over the world, with little or no preparation or supervision and intrude into poor people's lives with neither the knowledge nor the time to evaluate whether or not their intervention was beneficial or harmful.

Professors often evade responsibility by arguing that they are relying on development organizations, missionaries, or other knowledgeable locals to design an appropriate and effective experience. First, such an argument would not protect a university from liability in another setting. The university and its professors are ultimately responsible for the programs that they approve for their students. Second, it is clearly unwise to assume that local leaders, many of whom are equally ignorant about development principles and often depend on

the donations of groups such as these to continue working, have the knowledge and ability to design appropriate and effective experiences. In Honduras we know of many organizations and individuals who host service-learning groups but will readily admit that it is not good development though it is a good way to raise money.

I argue that service-learning experiences that are going to affect the lives of the poor need much stronger reviews and evaluations than are currently present. The best situation would be that each service-learning experience that is going to directly affect the poor should be reviewed, supervised, and evaluated by a panel of professionals in much the same way that psychology experiments or standards for students doing counseling are prepared and reviewed. Short of that, we need to begin to set up voluntary reviews by groups of knowledgeable peers, as well as guidelines and standards that professors can use in developing service-learning experiences. In such an effort, questions rising from Bryant and White's four characteristics would be useful:

1. Empowerment: Are we relatively certain that those we serve will be empowered by this intervention? Are they the ones making the decisions, controlling the process? Are the economic and human resources from the outside being given in a manner that contributes to rather than overwhelms a local process? Are we building on the strengths of the local community?

2. Capacity building: Are we relatively certain that those we serve will improve their capacity as a result of this intervention? Will they be learning new skills and gaining new energy and motivations? Finally, will their existing skills, ideas, and motivation be respected and encouraged?

3. Equity: Will the benefits of this intervention be distributed equitably or at least be focused on the most needy in the population? Can we design the intervention in a way so that the community benefits rather than individuals, and if not, can we make sure that the beneficiaries are chosen in a way that prioritizes the most needy?

4. Sustainability: Will this project be sustainable given the human, environmental and economic resources available locally?

Finally, these questions should not only be considered while planning a service-learning component, but they should be monitored and evaluated during and after the intervention. This is normal operating procedure for most university programs, accreditation processes, and professional programs that deal with needy populations. However, service-learning opportunities tend to be evaluated by students and professors and possibly by the host organization regarding the extent to which these two or three groups were "content" and "pleased" with the experience and the resulting learning but not by its end results on those being "served." Harkavy, who levels similar criticisms on service-learning that does not resolve community problems, when citing two model classes at Penn University, mentions only the positive effects of the service-learning program on student, professors, and the school principals but has no figures on the effects on teenage pregnancy, which the program is supposed to be addressing (Harkavy 1996). I argue that service-learning programs, which seek to help the poor, should be planned and approved based on development principles. Then they need to be monitored and evaluated based on their effects on the needy. If they are not accomplishing their goals *for the needy*, they should be changed or eliminated.

## Evaluating the Impact on Student Learning

The second issue to consider is whether or not the service-learner is truly learning how to better understand the world, its problems, and how to best address them. The most common message that seems to be transmitted in service-learning efforts is that a poor person has a need, and the student can and should fix it. A poor person in Honduras needs a house; the Illinois students can build one. A Chicago family's house needs paint; Michigan students can paint it. The service-learner in this scenario is learning that they are the ones with the resources, abilities, motivation, and ideas to solve "the problem of the poor." Asking students who are participating in these experiences why they are involved gives good insight into their perspective. Often, the first statement they make is usually about what they *did*. "We all went to Honduras to build a house, to help out after the hurricane," or, "We painted a house for an inner-city family." If you ask specifically what they learned, they might tell you, but it is not how they primarily explain and construct their experience. It is first of all about *doing* something for the poor—learning is often a distant second.

An overemphasis on doing also means that service-learners may often consciously or unconsciously pass up opportunities to learn more about their context and those they are serving. In Honduras, we regularly hear of groups who were too busy to take a break when Hondurans arrived offering coffee and cookies at work sites. As a result, they do not listen to Hondurans—to their joys, needs, accomplishments, and daily struggles. Other groups have turned down opportunities to visit historical sites such as Copan or complain of wasting their time in orientation or talks about Honduras' history. The groups' focus on finishing their project is especially disconcerting when we analyze the costs. The $4,000 house could have been built by much-in-need-of-work Hondurans for an extra $500. The $25,000 the group raised to come down and do the work could have built five more houses. The economics demonstrate that this is not a very cost-effective way to build a house, yet these groups clearly justify their reason for coming as doing not learning.

This does not mean that they do not learn. Unfortunately they often explain their observations in ways that develop or reinforce ideas about their own abilities and motivation and the perceived lack of such in the poor. A student member of a medical brigade recently commented that it was obvious to him why Hondurans were poor—the fact that even those who were not sick "just all stood around all day watching the doctors work" showed him that they either had nothing to do or did not like doing it. It did not seem to occur to this student why a visit by five North American doctors with all their equipment and medicines would be the equivalent of the circus coming to town for very remote villagers. Other groups have explained Honduran poverty by pointing to the number of apparently able-bodied but unoccupied poor males on the streets during work hours or the number of children poor families are raising or the government's lack of social services. Similar stories are common in the United States. A student recently told of repairing a poor family's porch in the United States while the two teenage sons sat inside and watched TV. Despite the fact that the service-learners are usually focused on doing, they do not stop processing their experiences in ways that often only reinforce negative stereotypes about the poor.

Learning that breaks out of stereotypes and opens students' eyes will usually take preparation, guidance, and reflection, which can be missing from certain service experiences. Having students trying to do or fix things without understanding what are the true problems, its symptoms, and real solutions is

irresponsible at best. One of my students had spent six weeks in Haiti refurbishing an orphanage but learned nothing during her stay about Haitian history or even what type of government was in power in Haiti. She came away with superficial and stereotypical explanations for Haiti's poverty. This sort of service would clearly be unacceptable in other fields. Calvin College is rightfully proud of a service-learning project in which biology students sample pond water to discover any pollutants. However, if high levels of nitrates are found, the professor is unlikely to propose adding large amounts of phosphates to neutralize the nitrates. She knows that such a solution would be short-lived at best and likely cause other complications. Rather, the students and professor need to find the sources of the pollution and together plan interventions that will help the pond in the short term while resolving the underlying problem. The poor being served deserve the same kind of consideration. Students and professors need to spend much more time with the poor to understand their problems and then together look for solutions that seek to resolve the short-term needs as well as the longer-term problems. Obviously this will require a much larger focus on learning than doing—on understanding development, culture, language, history and local resources, needs, accomplishments, and ideas. This is not something that students or professors should take lightly—we should only intervene with a great deal of respect, fear, and desire to tread carefully and properly.

**Learning before Serving**

I also argue that service-learners who want to help the poor need to *learn* much more before they *serve*. In addition, even once they are serving the focus should always be very clearly on learning from those they are helping. A predominant focus on learning will undercut any attempt by students to justify their efforts as helping and as a result will not create a savior-complex. Being clear from the beginning that the focus is on learning will also change students' attitudes toward non-doing activities such as having coffee with a poor neighbor woman, visiting historical sites, or having a lecture on the United States role in Honduran poverty. Finally, a learning focus led by knowledgeable and experienced staff will allow students to prepare for, experience and reflect on their encounters in a way that will question their stereotypes, allow them to form new understandings

of the problems facing the poor, and begin to develop new alternatives for addressing them.

Focusing on learning does not mean sitting at a desk in front of a blackboard. According to Dewey (1938), *genuine* learning only occurs when human beings focus their attention, energies, and abilities on solving *genuine* dilemmas and perplexities. Before trying to fix poverty in Honduras, students need to meet the poor; listen and talk with them; observe how they plant their corn, build their houses, taste their food, play with their children; and maybe dry the tears of a mother whose child died of malnutrition. Students need to experience poverty, spend time in the Third World, and in the inner city. It is only after such learning that students will understand the *genuine* (rather than their imagined) dilemmas of poverty and be able to begin addressing them.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, I want to clarify what I am not saying. First, I am not arguing that students should not try to help the poor. I think that most North Americans (who are nearly all extremely wealthy in global terms) do far too little to address one of the greatest problems that face us in this new century—poverty and inequality. Second, I am not arguing that students (and professors) should not visit Third World countries or other poverty-stricken areas. People need to be exposed to how half of the earth's population, three billion people, lives on less than $2 a day. Third, I do not believe that the problems with the typical service-learning experiences in Honduras are unique. Very similar problems occur in projects in other countries, including North America. Finally, I am certainly not arguing that students should stay in a classroom setting until they have all the knowledge to fix the world's problems.

I am arguing that we need to learn from and about the poor before trying to fix things. Listening to the poor, observing, respecting, and dialoguing about their lives before trying to do something sends the right message. It affirms their value, their God-given dignity and their knowledge. I am also arguing that we can learn a great deal without serving—at least in the traditional sense. Simply listening, observing, and encouraging may often be the best way to both learn and serve others. We, both academics and professional development workers, are responsible to provide students the best learning opportunities possible. It is condescending both to the poor and to students to assume that we fix things

without understanding the problems first. By failing to do so, we do a disservice to the poor, the students, and ourselves. By focusing on learning and experiencing life in the Third World, we honor the dignity and complexity of the learning process.

Finally, I am also arguing that once students and their professors are properly prepared and are convinced that serving is appropriate, we need to do so cautiously, asking hard questions and holding ourselves to the highest standards possible. We need to plan interventions, which build on the experience and knowledge of generations of people who have gone before and even then monitor and evaluate our interventions to make sure they are benefiting the poor. Voluntary or even mandatory peer reviews as well as standards and guidelines for such experiences may be helpful or even necessary. Service-learning projects that are planned, implemented, and evaluated by well-prepared groups are much more likely to be empowering-building capacities, both sustainable and equitable. As a result they will be truly good service and learning.

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