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International Service Learning and Short-Term Business Study Abroad Programs: A Case Study

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A service learning project was recently incorporated into a short-term business study abroad program to Southeast Asia. In this article we discuss the benefits and challenges of international service learning courses. While most service learning projects in the local community around campus are often significant learning experiences for students, an international service learning experience in a developing country, such as Cambodia, may have a profound effect on students. This appears to be the first study to integrate international service learning into a short-term business study abroad program.

We addressed the following questions in this study:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Is there a place for service learning projects in a short-term business study abroad program?

RQ2: If so, how should they be integrated into the program?

RQ3: What do business students actually learn from a service learning project?

The assessment method used included a combination of surveys and reflection papers. This approach helps to supplement the qualitative aspects of reflection reports with quantitative analysis of survey to triangulate the results. Lessons learned that arise in international service learning courses are discussed in this paper. Recommendations to address the challenges in our first international service learning project are provided for future programs.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Service learning has been defined in many ways. Smith-Paríolá and Gökê-Paríolá (2006) suggested it includes an organized service activity meeting community needs and a reflection on how those activities help students gain further understanding. It has also been described as a way of integrating experiential learning, coursework, and community needs (Andrews, 2007).

Most international service learning programs are designed to be long term, where students often spend at least a full semester abroad. Service learning programs as a part of business study abroad programs do not seem to be common, although several authors have reported their experiences with service learning in business study abroad programs (e.g.,...
Andrews, 2007; Coffey & Wang, 2006; Gujarathi & McQuade, 2002; Parker & Altman Dautoff, 2007).

THE NATURE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE 2010 SOUTHEAST ASIA STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM

In the summer of 2010, the Southeast Asia Study Abroad program organized by the authors incorporated a service learning project as part of a two-week study abroad program. Seventeen students participated in the program, which took them to three Southeast Asian countries—Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. The program offered two courses: International Economics and International Entrepreneurial Marketing. Students signed up for one or both courses.

Students were required to attend three predeparture meetings, keep a daily journal, write three reflection papers, complete two surveys, and write a final group term paper on a subject related to the course(s) in which they were enrolled. In preparation for the study abroad course, students were required to learn about the cultures, histories, and economies of the countries to be visited and to be acquainted with the companies that were planned to visit. Students also learned about the host organization, and the service learning projects.

The academic components of the study abroad program took place in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and Bangkok, Thailand. The cultural excursion components took place in the Mekong Delta, Angkor temples, and Pattaya.

Finding a host organization to work with students on service-learning projects can be a challenge. Monard-Weissman and Porter (2001) and Kiely and Nielsen (2003) raised the importance of partnerships claiming that international service learning is an experience built on reciprocity where all parties involved must mutually benefit. Both the host organization and the faculty-led study abroad program should act as equal partners in the service learning experience to avoid a paternalistic paradigm where the host organization is merely the passive recipient of charity (Baker-Boosamra, Guevara, & Balfour, 2006). This program was very privileged to partner with a nongovernmental organization (NGO), Jesuit Service in Siem Reap, Cambodia. This NGO is involved with a number of activities, including rural development, schools, help for landmine survivors, and a number of other activities.

It was anticipated that students could benefit from understanding the consequences of war and the issues of education brought by extreme poverty. Students participated in two service learning projects—planting trees at two rural schools and assembling wheelchairs for landmine survivors. Prior to the trip, the students also raised about $1,000 to support education and health projects and brought children’s books, crayons, and toys to distribute to local school children. Compared to Vietnam and Thailand, Cambodia is much poorer and has experienced a great deal of hardship through wars and civil unrest. Thus, part of the service learning project was to deal with the issues of injured people, extreme poverty, and the consequences of war. The students were fortunate to meet Mr. Tun Channareth, who works at Jesuit Service. Mr. Tun is a 1997 Nobel Peace Prize recipient on behalf of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). His story was most enlightening and brought home to the group the ravages of war, as he is a double amputee, losing both legs from a landmine.

Reflection has been recognized by many service learning experts as an important part of service learning projects (e.g., Grusky, 2000; Molee et al., 2010; Urraca, Ledoux, & Harris, 2009). The study tour program required three reflection reports. Prior to departure, students wrote a short prereflection (pretrip reflection) paper describing their expectations and concerns about the proposed international service learning projects. The second reflection report was written immediately after the service day. For this report, students were prompted to write about their initial reflections of their experiences and emotions on the day of the service. The third reflection report occurred after students returned home and was considered to be a thoughtful reflection of their expectations, experiences, and integration of those experiences.

In addition to the reflection reports, students completed a pretrip survey and a posttrip survey. The pretrip survey provided background on the students participating in the service learning study tour and included demographic questions and questions regarding their work and volunteerism, as well as their expectations for the service learning component. The posttrip survey went into greater depth on the perceived usefulness of the service learning experience. Results from the surveys are reported later.

ASSESSMENT OF SERVICE LEARNING

Both qualitative assessment (Tonkin & Quioga, 2004) and other assessment techniques of service learning have been reported in the literature (Crabtree, 2008). The approach taken has been to use triangulation by supplementing qualitative reflection and quantitative analysis with literature review.

Surveys

Both pretrip and posttrip surveys were administered online. There were 7 demographic questions in each survey. The pretrip survey had six questions regarding students’ attitudes toward service in the community. The posttrip survey had 16 questions regarding students’ experience with service learning. Both surveys used 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The surveys were modified from surveys used in previous studies by colleagues in the Seattle University Academic Service Learning Fellowship Program.
Pretrip survey. The response rate was 100% for this survey. Overall, students agreed on the importance of community service and believed that most people can make a difference in their community. Undergraduate students were more enthusiastic about the idea of combining service learning with coursework compared to graduate students. This finding is not surprising because most undergraduate students are full-time while graduate students are in the part-time evening program with less opportunity to participate in service learning classes. However, they both valued the service learning opportunity in the study abroad program.

One question asked whether students have had prior volunteering experience before taking this course. The average response was 3.47 (SD = 1.18). Nine of the 17 students indicated they had little or no experience volunteering. Another question asked whether students have a good understanding of the needs and problems facing the community they are about to serve. The responses were either “neutral” or “disagree” from both groups. This raises an issue of preparing students to serve. The responses were either “neutral” or “disagree” from both groups. This raises an issue of preparing students to serve.

Posttrip survey. The response rate was 100%. The posttrip survey helped answer the questions about what business students actually learn from a service learning project, and how a service learning project will influence their personal and business careers after they return home.

The responses suggest that business students, particularly undergraduate students, enjoy the idea of integrating service learning into more classes. Undergraduate students had more volunteering experience in their community than graduate students.

Most students agreed that the service learning projects benefited the community and helped them to become more aware of poverty in developing countries. However, when the lessons students learned in the service learning projects can be used in real life, it appears that business students did not always understand the relevance of service learning to their everyday lives.

The score of how a service learning project influenced students’ personal and business careers is 2.98/5 (SD = 0.75), implying that the students felt very neutral about the influence of service learning on their lives.

Questions related to cultural awareness, personal biases and prejudices indicated students were comfortable working with cultures other than their own with the overall score of 4.30/5 (SD = 0.70). Students felt somewhat neutral and agreed with the statement asking whether they felt that they can make a difference in the community through service learning in a developing country. Students also felt somewhat neutral or agreed that as a result of their service learning experience, they had a better understanding of their role as a global citizen. Students responded positively that they would encourage other students to participate in a study tour with service learning projects. Students indicated that they would be most likely to enroll in more service learning and they strongly disagreed that they would not volunteer again in the future. Overall, they thought international service learning is a worthy addition to the business study tour.

Reflection Reports Content Analysis

Content analysis is used to systematically analyze reflection reports into objective categories. Smith-Parîolâ and Gökê-Parîolâ (2006) argued that a well-structured reflection program is the key enabler for students to get the most out of their service learning experience. Thus in the service learning project students were asked to submit three written reflection reports on their expectations and learning experiences. In the pretrip reflection, students were asked what they expected to get out of the service learning experience and their concerns about the projects. In the initial reflection on the day of the service, students were asked to share their thoughts on the experience, reaction to poverty, and organization of the service learning projects. Finally, in the posttrip reflection report, students shared their overall learning experience of the service.

Prereflexion. In the pretrip reflection, with a 100% response rate, 77% of students responded that they would like to learn more about daily life in Cambodia and to increase their sense of connection with locals. Forty-one percent responded that they expected to improve personal development and knowledge. Twenty-four percent stated that they would like to help those in a less fortunate situation.

An example of personal expectations of the service learning experience is the following:

I expect to come out of this experience with a more complete understanding of the issues facing the people of Cambodia. I would also like to gain an understanding of the work the Jesuit Service does and what the Jesuit name means globally.

Sixty-five percent of students worried about not being fully prepared for the service learning projects in Cambodia. Twenty-four percent worried about interaction with the locals, and 18% were concerned that they would not make a meaningful impact. Twelve percent worried about Jesuit Service not living up to their expectations. Responses to concerns about service learning activity illustrate that students were worried about their preparation for an international encounter with poverty and also about their contribution to service. They were also skeptical about the host institution, as a religious organization, to serve the poor.

A couple of students raised concerns about what they were about to experience in their pretrip reflection reports:
I tend to feel a lot of empathy for people in vulnerable situations, and the experience may be difficult to deal with emotionally.

I don’t think I’m prepared to witness the poverty and physical dismemberment that we will witness in Cambodia.

**Day of service reflection.** After spending a day at Jesuit Service, students submitted a reflection report on their service learning experience. The response rate was 59%. The reflection reports were classified into three categories: initial thoughts, reaction to poverty, and organization.

On initial thoughts, 100% of students responded that planting trees and interacting with the children were one of the highlights of the service learning experience. Fifty percent thought that assembling wheelchairs was not only a physical exercise, but also an exercise of heart and mind. Thirty percent agreed that service learning was overall a positive experience of Jesuit education at Seattle University.

One student commented on the experience of building wheelchairs for landmine victims:

Building wheelchairs was a lesson beyond assembling nuts and bolts. Working in the heat, while sitting on mats with no instructions and landmine survivors that speak another language, was a lesson in humbleness, patience, pride, and ambition. I cannot imagine that I will ever do something similar again.

The service learning had an impact, as reflected in one journal entry:

In a [service learning] program that emphasizes sustainability and ethics—this was a powerful lesson that beats a textbook or class discussion any day.

Reaction to extreme poverty was difficult for some students. Forty percent felt uncomfortable with the poverty they observed. Twenty percent wished that they could have had a more long-lasting impact.

On organization, 70% of the students stated that the visit to the villages to plant trees at rural schools with the children could have been better organized, and 40% thought that more clear instructions should be given to assemble wheelchairs.

**Posttrip reflection.** Finally, students submitted the posttrip reflection about a month after returning to the United States. The response rate from the 17 students was 82%. Overall, 71% of the students reported that they enjoyed the service activities of the trip. The same percentage agreed that the service learning activities were beneficial for them as business students and the local community they served in Cambodia. Fifty-seven percent reported that the service learning activities were beneficial for them as business students and the local community they served in Cambodia. Fifty percent said that they learned more about Cambodian people and their culture through service learning activities. Seventy percent thought that the service learning activities can be improved through better organization and coordination with the Jesuit Service. This comment reflects the seeming lack of organization of the Cambodian leaders. However, this may just be another symptom of cultural differences. Student comments were the following:

At its best, service learning should allow students to apply what has been learned in a classroom to a real world experience. I think the experience at the Jesuit Service did give me a better understanding of what the issues were in Cambodia and what life is like for the people of Cambodia.

As Westerners we are fearful of the unknown, sometimes it’s difficult to be flexible in the Eastern cultures where time is not always of essence.

Findings from the content analysis of the reflection reports are similar to those of Tonkin and Quioga (2004), who examined how students reflect on their own values, cultures, and norms after spending time experiencing international service learning. Some of the similarities include difficulty with organization by the host organization and efficiency and the pace at which things took place. Many of these perceptions were undoubtedly due to cultural differences.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

The main goal of this study was to provide lessons learned and recommendations for incorporating service learning in future study abroad programs. Overall, students reflected that service learning did have an impact on them. Some of the takeaways students expressed in their reflection reports are included in the following comments:

Going forward I will remember this experience, and it will sharpen some of my decisions with regard to future service work in my community and elsewhere.

Nearly a month after completing the service learning project in Cambodia I still think of that day as the most impactful one of the trip. When telling others of my time in Southeast Asia I immediately think of our volunteer work, the people we met with and the stories we heard – and that is what I share first.

Even though the duration of service learning was short, students developed a strong link to the organization they served beyond the program, demonstrating through their desire and commitment to assist the Jesuit Service in the future. Some students were able to reflect on the impact of American foreign policies and practices on the rest of the world and took action. Two undergraduate students were inspired by the
work of Tun Channareth on banning landmines and cluster munitions and organized a signature drive on campus in fall quarter of 2010 urging fellow students, staff, and faculty on campus to sign a petition for the United States to ban landmines and cluster bombs. The two sponsoring faculty were so impressed by Mr. Tun’s experiences that he was nominated as a Seattle University commencement speaker. The nomination was approved and Mr. Tun delivered a passionate and articulate commencement speech in June 2011.

Some of the challenges experienced included (a) preparing students to deal with poverty in a developing country; (b) organizational problems, which included a lack of organization by the host organization, and some of these issues may be cultural, but faculty should have better prepared students for cultural differences, including organization; and (c) faculty should have done a better job with reflection reports, especially holding a group discussion after the day of service in addition to individual service reports.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Some recommendations to prepare faculty and students for future international service learning projects are offered. Some lessons learned have already been implemented successfully for service learning projects in the Da Nang and Quang Tri Province. We are in the process of analyzing the data for comparison.

To get the most out of academic service learning projects, students need to take reflective work seriously. More credit should be weighted towards the reflection reports as incentives for students to get involved. Faculty should be better trained in guiding the reflection process and in developing assessment methods. Urraca et al. (2009) argued that "reflection does not come naturally; it needs to be nurtured and encouraged" (p. 287). This experience demonstrated that reflections could have been better facilitated to allow students to move out of passive learner role and into active participants in discussion, as suggested by Smith-Paríolá and Gökê-Paríolá (2006). The day of service reflection should have been done orally in a group where students led the reflection and shared their immediate thoughts with fellow students.

Some of the challenges facing students reentering their cultures from a study abroad are discussed by Tonkin and Quiroga (2004). The university provides opportunities for students to share experiences and memories from the trip, and take actions to achieve their educational goals. Taking advantage of these opportunities is recommended. For example, the Study Abroad Office and the Center for International Scholars provide a forum for study abroad participants to communicate in a form of regular and on-going meetings to connect past, present, and potential participants.

Also recommended is finding an NGO with shared vision and purposes, clear objectives on the scope of projects, clear evaluation on the outcomes for students and the host organization, and building a long term relationship. It is recommended that students get directly involved with the host organization in the service learning projects prior to departure in order for students to feel that they have direct ownership of the projects. This recommendation requires mutual trust and commitment between the Jesuit Service and Seattle University through reciprocity.

Future researchers should focus on ways to integrate reflection with the service projects more smoothly. If reflection is as important as scholars think it is it needs to be made a seamless process in some way.

**CONCLUSION**

Experience with the short-term study abroad program suggests that a service learning component can indeed add value to the overall experience for business students. Seeing poverty first hand and doing something about it may be a first experience for many business students, but it seems to be a transformational one for many. Anecdotal evidence suggests that experiencing these issues in a developing country may be informative for many students.

The students on this study tour learned not only about poverty and the ravages of war, but also something about themselves. Working with landmine survivors also inspired some students to take action on campus to advocate for banning landmines and cluster munitions. Faculty leaders of the study tour also learned that while planning ahead is important, things do not always go as anticipated, especially in a developing country. The lessons of importance of reflection and need to take a greater role in structuring reflection reports and in conducting informal reflection sessions soon after service learning projects occur were also learned. In this case, however, the faculty were pleasantly surprised at the effectiveness of service learning in making business students not only aware but also sensitive to poverty in a developing country. As a result, students may approach business decisions with a greater understanding of their impact on poverty and society.

**REFERENCES**


