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STUDENT VOICES

Arriving as Strangers, Welcomed as Friends: Student Reflections on Mindsets, Equity, and Partnerships in International Service-Learning

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We began as a group of students interested in conducting a service-learning project in rural South Africa. As we prepared, we quickly found ourselves exposed to a broad range of literature and personal testimony regarding campus-community engagement that ranged from glowing praise to outright criticism (Butin, 2010; Handler, 2013). While we had been educated about the importance of student mindsets, equity in the engagement, and long-lasting relationships, we still found ourselves faced with the uncertainties of working with people whom we did not know well, in a place we did not know well, with a project where we were not experts. Furthermore, we were deeply concerned with whether we should even attempt to conduct an international service-learning project for fear of potentially causing harm to the community.

In preparation for a service-learning project focused on implementing an improved design for wood-burning cook stoves, known as Rocket Stoves, in the rural Limpopo Province of South Africa, the team became aware of the importance of process in service-learning and community engagement. Team members were taught that underlying all engagements were the fundamental tenets of respect, reciprocity, and relationship. The team members had been exposed to the notion that real world challenges know no disciplinary boundaries and that such challenges required a diverse knowledge base to arrive at appropriate approaches. Coursework had made the team aware of the value of multiple forms of knowledge, existing both inside and outside academic settings. Most formal courses stress that knowledge outside of the academy, while present, was often silent and only exchanged between the community, faculty,

and students after the practice of responsible engagement with the community had been demonstrated (Chambers, 1983). We came to see that the lack of respect for and exchange of knowledge between community and the project team could result in ineffective service-learning and community engagement project outcomes. Near the end of the stateside project preparation, our student team came to comprehend the protocols of service-learning as a type of etiquette around the process of engagement as people first, process second, and product third.

We have seen firsthand that any other focus can lead to highly product-driven, individualistic mindsets. We understand how easy it can be to fall into the trap of seeing one's education as a linear process designed for corporate readiness, an education that places a strong emphasis on results, rather than on the process of learning how to learn and think for oneself. Such observations are consistent with the views of scholars such as Hirschman (1986), who have found that these highly individualistic mindsets reinforce self-centered interest behavior and run counter to collaboration and engagement. With these economistic, product-first mindsets, it follows that students, more often than not, undertake service-learning projects to produce a tangible product. This "get the job done" mentality tends to focus on project rather than people and process (Brown-Glazner, Gutierrez, & Heil, 2009). Our courses had impressed upon us that such approaches can lead to extractive, asymmetrical, student-community engagements, which over time may make communities less receptive to entertaining outsiders (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Clayton,

Bringle, Senor, Huq, & Morrison, 2010; Nelson & Klak, 2013).

During project preparation we were taught that the community voice often goes unheard during project planning and implementation, all while the campus service-learning team works toward its predetermined goals. Little if any thought is given to the principle of equity and engaging all stakeholders from the inception of the proposed activity (Sandy & Holland, 2006). It is as if the community is there to serve the students and their project, in spite of the stated purpose to learn from and serve the community. The principles of respect, reciprocity, and relationship can be overlooked, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in engagement between outsiders (the students and faculty) and insiders (the community). Too often, as noted by Clayton et al. (2010), this can result in extractive relationships that lead to ongoing dependencies within the community long after the service-learning engagements are completed.

As undergraduates from the United States, we were accustomed to pursuing the most efficient and effective approach to group work in order to produce the best product. We entered the planning phase of this project with the intellectual awareness instilled by service-learning and community engagement-focused courses. Even so, we had to fight against the notion of racing through the process of checking off items on a list of pre-departure requirements; we tried not to succumb to "walking fast by walking alone"[1] during the preparation process. While we had heard the proverb that stressed the importance of walking far by walking together, there were many uncertainties as to how this implementation would occur. By adhering to our people-first principle, we relied on this method to ensure we could effectively engage with the rural South African communities.

With this as the backdrop, an interesting thing happened upon the arrival of the student team in the rural setting of the Limpopo Province; the team was greeted by the community not as a group of imposing strangers, as the team had feared, but received warmly, almost as friends. The larger community was there to welcome the team with an opening reception at the local primary school. Furthermore, at the completion of the reception, staff from the primary school invited the student members of the team to their homes and hosted them for the duration of the stay. We, as members of the student team, did not expect to receive the

degree of hospitality from the community that we experienced. Such a warm welcome helped alleviate some of our trepidation. With all that was occurring at that time, the team did not have the opportunity to reflect on much of anything, let alone the welcome, its significance, and what had prompted it.

The time for reflection would present itself after returning home and to campus the following fall. During that first semester back, the student team participated in a group independent study to reflexively process the experience. One of the most challenging aspects of this process was understanding exactly how the team, comprised primarily of relatively young students, could enter a close-knit community as almost complete strangers, and yet be welcomed as friends. This reaction seemed counter to experiences of many student groups involved in international service-learning community engagement that critics have noted, leaving our group to reflect upon why was this our experience. Was this purely cultural or was there something else, something deeper that the team was not aware of? The team's first inkling that this might have been something deeper came from the realization that the initial spirit of collaboration continued both during and after our time in the region.

As we began the process of post-field reflection, we sought to comprehend our experience and quickly focused on what we found to be three key aspects of service-learning community engagement: the role of our mindsets as students, the role of equity in partner participation in these activities, and the role of facilitative relationships. Throughout formal (in class) and informal (outside of class) educational activities to prepare for this project, the concept of maintaining a "beginner's mind" was constantly reinforced. While we had heard this concept countless times prior to departure and had understood it in the abstract, it was not until having lived it in the field during the project that this concept actually made sense in practice. A concrete example of this was when one of the local artisan members of our team came up with several solutions to challenges that the team faced. As it turned out, the protective roofing structures that originally covered the first generation of stoves were not as durable as they needed to be. At first we looked to merely replace the roofs with a similar design; however, we listened to a solution that was offered from one of the least likely members of our team, the artisan from another province, who had joined

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[1] This comes from the African proverb "If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together."

us to learn about these stoves. His suggestion was to go with a metal frame that was easily sourced, highly durable, and that could be maintained in a cost-effective fashion by members of the local community. Without his help, we could have easily gone with a solution that would have created further economic and logistical burdens for the community. Upon further reflection back home, we realized that if we had not placed the emphasis on entering into this engagement process with a "beginner's mind" as learners, there was a very real risk of the student team adopting a product-oriented mindset that might have allowed us to accomplish our goals efficiently, but would have possibly harmed engagement with the community.

The original student effort to design and construct modified wood burning stoves in this area of the Limpopo Province took place over a nearly two-year period (2008-2010) and is detailed elsewhere (de Chastonay, Bugas, Soni, & Swap, 2012). While that original effort was in response to the stated needs of the Mashamba Primary School located within the larger community, a broader community engagement around the stoves emerged through the process of collaboration and knowledge exchange. This engagement was defined as one in which more members of the community were able to have their voices heard, and one in which the undergraduate students were able to step to the side for full community ownership.

As part of the ongoing efforts of an international program involving faculty, practitioners, students, and communities associated with different African and U.S. institutions of higher learning known as the Eastern/Southern African Virginia Networks and Associations[2] (ESAVANA) study abroad activities, two of our own student team members traveled to Mashamba in 2011, a year after the first stove was constructed. These new students had the opportunity to observe the original stove and learn that two more had been built by the school on their own initiative. These new students were also able to interact with school staff, teachers, and administrators (de Chastonay et al., 2012). More importantly, they were able to see the increased community interest around the original implementation, interest that had spread well beyond the Mashamba community. As learners within the larger context of the ESAVANA study

abroad program, the new students were able to interact under the umbrella of the larger relationship without imposing upon school stakeholders and local community members to the degree that a relatively unknown student group outside of the context of these longstanding relationships would. These interactions led to dialogues between the community and the ESAVANA study abroad participants, around the emergence of additional student energies to expand the implementation of appropriate wood-stove technology. These conversations led to brainstorming sessions to improve upon the design so as to have the outcomes desired by the community. Upon their return to their home campus, these new students pursued additional coursework and devoted the next year to developing ideas for a project plan. The student team utilized the existing, facilitative relationships between faculty, practitioners, community members, and students from the U.S. and South Africa to collaborate with Mashamba stakeholders and to incorporate their expressed concerns regarding the first generation of the modified wood burning cook stoves. With the voice of the community front and center in the design process, the student team iteratively developed a proposal for implementing additional stoves with the collaboratively improved stove design.

This iterative process of consultation and engagement over a prolonged period, facilitated a community of trust between the team and the community. A pivotal aspect of this project partnership was the utilization of asset-based community development (ABCD) (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). Using this approach that sought to recognize and engage the strengths and expertise inherent in the community, the team created space and opportunities for local community members to enter into the project. Our desire was to create the opportunity for both parties—researchers from the outside and community members from the inside—to capitalize on available resources and leverage off of each other's strengths to yield a more feasible, resilient, and sustainable outcome. First, knowledge was exchanged regarding the impact of the first generation of modified Rocket Stoves. Knowledge concerning the stoves' performance and suggestions for improvements were exchanged between the key stakeholders, the cooking staff at the school, and the students seeking to improve upon original implementation. Second, all stakeholders had the opportunity to comment on and contribute to the evolving

[2]Originally established as the SAVANA Consortium (SWAP et al., 2008), the network expanded in 2010 to include colleagues from Eastern and Central Africa and is now known as ESAVANA-Eastern/Southern Africa Virgina Networks and Associations (Intolubbe-Chmil et al., 2012).

design during the project-planning phase. Over the course of six months prior to departure, the student team demonstrated due diligence in following up on these expressed concerns through communications with the other project stakeholders, faculty, community mentors, and local craftsmen. Such communication allowed for the collaborative identification of other individuals with the necessary expertise to complete the team. These included skilled craftsmen, local teachers, community development practitioners, and students from the local university. The project team's intentions were to account for and recognize the assets that both the community (knowledge of how the stoves work in practice and more importantly how they do not work, construction skills, etc.) and the student researchers (energy, passion, openness to learn) brought to bear on this project, so that all parties would have a sense of equity and, therefore, joint ownership in this project.

This trust was further deepened by the actions of the project team that included being part of the community. Team members demonstrated their commitment to being present in and part of the community by living within the community with the school's teachers, holding open meetings to foster discussion, and engaging in transparent dialogue among stakeholders. While participating in these activities, the project team was approached with and responded to additional requests by the community. Sometimes these requests fell outside of the initial project scope, such as the need for cultural exchange events and computer classes for teachers. and the nature of the requests left the team feeling overwhelmed and helpless at times. However, upon further reflection, the student team came to understand this sharing of requests beyond the nature of the project as a demonstration by the community of a certain level of comfort and trust with the project team. More importantly, the way forward for the stove project may not have been possible without that level of trust and comfort between the students and the community, a trust whose solid foundation had already been established by these longer-term relationships. We came to see that the ongoing personal, professional, and institutional relationships, when combined with an open mind when responding to these requests, helped to create a stronger community of trust and more resilient partnership between student and community.

The team also came to realize that the ability to conduct this project emerged from more than just the initiative of the students and their collaboration with the community; it was also due in part to a combination of personal, professional, and institutional relationships developed over nearly two decades. While intellectually the student team had known the existence and importance of the existing partnerships beyond the original student stove project, it was not until having returned and reflecting upon this further that the team came to appreciate more fully the power of those existing partnerships. As part of the reflection process, we came to understand that the community of trust that we had become a part of had at its roots the shared, lived experiences of at least two large-scale, multi-year research, education, and outreach programs. The first of these programs was the international Southern African Regional Science Initiative (SAFARI 2000) that ran from 1998–2003 (Annegarn, Otter, Swap, & Scholes, 2002). This was the first formal, regional research activity to engage the universities and communities of this part of rural South Africa. The momentum of SAFARI 2000 helped to give rise to what is now known as the ESAVANA network. As part of a constant process of evolution, the ESAVANA relationship grew to incorporate additional disciplinary expertise at the University of Virginia (Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen, & Swap, 2012). With this increase in the disciplinary breadth, students also found increased opportunities for engagement through long-standing personal connections in Limpopo Province, more specifically with the village of Mashamba.

Our team benefited greatly from the exchange of knowledge, experience, and wisdom between faculty, practitioners, community members, and former South African and U.S students. An integral part of this transfer was between our team and a group of local university student members of their campus Global Sustainability Club, who were able to use a similar analytical mindset while providing insights as seen through a South African lens. Looking forward, the South African student was able to understand the project from a sustainability standpoint and how the networks would exist over time. Through this we were able to see how the etiquette that we had come to learn in class was put into practice in the field. As part of the reflexive process, we could now begin to understand how being associated with faculty, staff, and communities from these long-standing, respectful, and reciprocal relationships, might, in the eyes of those people whom we had not yet met, make us not appear as student strangers but

rather as relatives in an ongoing relationship.

As students, we often hear criticisms of international service-learning, criticisms that include projects not being maintained once the outside implementing teams have left the site and that many of these types of encounters are based on extractive engagements where student teams focus on projects almost exclusively (Brown-Glazner et al., 2009) and where the community has little equity (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Nelson & Klak, 2012). Our experience that involved implementing an international service-learning project, however, differs from these widely held criticisms. We found that the implementation of the Rocket Stoves in the Mashamba area has been effective not only in addressing the community's expressed needs, but also in creating an increased interest in this particular approach to energy efficient, wood burning stoves after our engagement. We support this assertion with the following facts: since 2010, 13 stoves have been constructed at 4 different schools; nearly half (6 of the 13) were built solely through the community's own initiative; as of 2013, these stoves are all functioning, and half a dozen more communities in the province of Limpopo have requested the plans for the modified Rocket Stoves. We attribute much of the expansion of this collaboratively developed approach to three main points: our mindsets as students; the community being vested in the process of generating an appropriate and contextually relevant solution; and a longstanding relationship with the local community and our local partnering institution of higher learning, the University of Venda. Project sustainability, the use of ABCD, and the cultural competence exhibited by students and community members were only accomplished through a relationship of respectful, responsible, and reciprocal collaboration and mentoring.

Through reflection, we understand that our respect for the process and adherence to the tacit etiquette around service-learning and community engagement contributed greatly to our arriving as strangers and being welcomed as friends. We aimed to ensure that the opportunity for reciprocity was maintained throughout the process for all stakeholders during the service-learning project. And finally we realized that such respectful behavior most likely contributed to faculty and community acceptance of our group and of our project and to our being entrusted with access to this facilitative partnership; we had demonstrated respect of the process and adherence

to its etiquette. Our efforts benefited greatly from the community of trust created by the rich and complex tapestry of relationships originating from respect and reciprocity. We know that our own time in South Africa is just one thread of a much bigger network, but we, as students, believe that is how service-learning should be—resilient braids of partnerships rather than tenuous strands of individual effort.

Acknowledgements

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