

# Creating an Authentic International Development Learning Opportunity: Lessons Learned from 30 Students, 12 Flights, 42 Range Rover Trips, One Capsized Boat, and Two Visits to Hospital



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*This paper draws on the author's experience of developing a short-term, intensive international learning experience within the framework of a one-semester course. This paper is aimed at faculty members who are interested in implementing a short but effective and authentic international learning opportunity, but who may not have expertise in issues surrounding international development and learning abroad. It addresses some of the challenges, successes, and lessons learned, such as working with an appropriate international partner, overcoming barriers to student participation, ensuring discipline-specific learning, and providing the appropriate context of international development issues within the time-frame of a single semester.*

*Nous nous fondons ici sur notre propre expérience d'élaboration d'une situation d'apprentissage internationale, intensive et à court terme, dans le cadre d'un cours d'un seul semestre. Cet article est destiné aux enseignants qui, sans nécessairement posséder une expertise en matière de développement internationale et d'apprentissage à l'étranger, souhaiteraient mettre en œuvre une expérience d'apprentissage internationale aussi brève qu'efficace et authentique. Nous abordons les difficultés, les réussites et les leçons tirées de l'expérience, comme la nécessité d'un partenaire international adéquat, le dépassement des obstacles à la participation des étudiants, l'apprentissage adapté à des disciplines en particulier, et l'établissement d'un contexte approprié pour les questions de développement international dans le cadre temporel d'un semestre unique.*

As someone with a keen interest in travel as well as service volunteering, I wanted to find a way to combine these personal passions with my work as a course instructor. I suggested to my department Chair that we test out a new course, "Media for International Development", in which students would have the opportunity to travel with me to a developing country to engage in volunteer service work.

In 2013, I took a group of students who had enrolled in the course to Adaklu Wayu, Ghana. We worked with a local development group who had determined that a community radio station could make an impact on local quality of life by providing access to information about agricultural practices and personal and public health, as well as creating some jobs within the community. The class collected used broadcasting equipment such as microphones, a

mixing board, headphones, CD players, and cabling, which we brought to Ghana and set up for testing in the office of the local development group. During our stay, we began construction work (digging the foundation and making bricks by hand) on the building that would become the radio station.

Since that first trip, I have run the course every other year since for a total of three times. After each trip, I refine the course. I shifted the focus of the students' work to creating videos and other media that could be used by our international development partner for public education and to promote their work. In 2015, we went to Honduras, one of the poorest countries in Latin America, with more than half the population living in poverty (CIA n.d.). Working with a Toronto-based organization that ran several schools for at-risk children in Honduras, our group visited an agricultural school for boys and shot two documentaries. One gave voice to several children at the school who told the story of their life and their aspirations. The other was a personal vlog-style record of what it was like for the Canadian students to be service volunteers at the school, including what they learned and how the experience changed them as people.

In 2017, we partnered with AMREF Health Africa and traveled to Kenya. We spent a week in Entasopia, a small village about 100km southwest of Nairobi that doesn't appear on Google Maps and required traveling on barely passable dirt roads to reach. We shot a documentary about AMREF's Alternative Rites of Passage program, which was aimed at eradicating the illegal practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among the Maasai, an ethnic group of Kenya and northern Tanzania. We spent a second week at AMREF's Child Development Centre in Dagoretti, a district of Nairobi that has a large number of children living in the streets due in large part to the high prevalence of untreated HIV/AIDS that leaves many children orphaned and vulnerable (NGO Aidmap, n.d.). Our task was to create a series of short videos that highlighted how a child's potential could be unlocked at the Dagoretti Centre.

## Why an International Experience?

According to Lindsey Parsons' survey of literature on the outcomes of education abroad programs (2010), an international educational experience results in intercultural sensitivity, increased self-awareness (or awareness of one's own cultural perspective), and an increased interest in international affairs and cross-cultural issues—all factors in developing intercultural competency.

Faculty members will have noticed the ever-increasing emphasis on internationalization at their post-secondary institutions. "Over the last two decades, the concept of the internationalization of higher education has moved from the fringe of institutional interest to the very core" (Brandenberg & de Wit 2015, p.15).

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada indicated in a 2006 study (as cited in Friesen, 2013) that "strong interest on the part of faculty members is the single most important organizational factor to support internationalization." However, strong interest does not necessarily mean that the faculty member also has expertise in developing learning-abroad activities. Benham Rennick & Desjardins (2013) point out that many faculty members who develop learning abroad activities do so with minimal consultation. While instructional development staff, senior administrators, and staff who run campus International Offices often meet across the country, faculty "who develop and run learning abroad programs...do not often or ever talk with one another." (p. 5-6).

Because this article addresses practical issues relating to implementing international learning experiences in a course, it is of value to the individual faculty members who are so central to the successful implementation of internationalization in higher education.

The course description for "Media for International Development" is as follows: Students will learn about international development, and the

role that media plays in it, through both classroom work and travel abroad to engage in a community development project. On completion of the course, students will have:

- Increased their international and intercultural awareness;
- Developed knowledge of some of the challenges faced by people in developing nations;
- Developed coping and resilience skills in a new cultural environment; and
- Developed skills in media production for development.

(Ryerson University 2017)

The 12-week course was roughly divided into three phases: pre-travel preparation (the first five weeks of the semester), travel (two weeks during Study Week and the week after), and post-travel (the last five weeks of the semester).

## Phase One

During the first phase, or pre-travel, activities in class included the following:

### Meeting the “Client” and Pitching Ideas

A representative from our international partner organization—considered the “client” for the purpose of situating the students as independent media producers—was invited to come to class to explain the development programs we would be working on. Students were given a week to do further research about the client’s programs and come up with a media concept to pitch. The following week, the client returned to hear the pitches and the “client” and professor consulted to choose the concepts that were the best fit for the organization’s goals, and those that could be achieved in the given timeframe.

### Pre-Production on Media Projects

The students whose pitches were given the green light became the “producers” of that project and other students became members of their production team.

Teams were asked to draft outlines, storyboards, scripts, shooting plans, and equipment lists—all the planning and documentation needed to ensure production during travel would go smoothly.

## Basics of International Development

While a 5-week time frame that must also include the activities mentioned above does not allow for a deep dive into international development, it seemed necessary to try to provide an overview of the aims of development work. Studying the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2015) provides a succinct framework for this. Students were asked to submit an essay on some aspect of international development as it related to the destination country.

## Preparation for Travel

Everything from organizing vaccines, travel documents, insurance, flights, etc., to discussing how to bathe using a bucket and what type of toilet facilities might be encountered, to what the local customs and expectations would be, and packing/preparing accordingly needed to be addressed.

## Phase Two

The second phase of the course was the two-week trip, scheduled for Study Week and the week after in order to minimize students’ absences from other classes. This phase, which included all the excitement and challenges of traveling to a new country, was also an intensive period of production for the students. Two weeks is a very short turnaround time to find and interview appropriate people for our documentaries and social media videos. It is important to ensure that all necessary footage and cutaway shots that help illustrate the story or give a sense of place are captured correctly in this time frame. We relied on help from our partner organization to find the right people and organize interview times before we arrived so that we could accomplish our tasks in the short amount of time we had available to us.

## Phase Three

The third phase of the course, after returning home, was an intense period of post-production activity: transcribing interviews, structuring stories, editing, sourcing music, preparing graphic titles, mastering sound, and delivering completed productions to our partner organization in appropriate formats. Amongst the production work, time was taken for the important task of self-reflection, and discussing what we learned from, and how we were changed by, our travel experience. Near the end of the semester we would organize a “Show and Tell” event, open to the university community as well as the public, to screen our productions and share our experiences.

## Learning Outcomes

While the course includes learning outcomes such as “increasing international and intercultural awareness” and “developing coping skills and resilience in a new cultural environment”, the assessments were not designed to specifically measure these types of learning outcomes. Assessments were based on “developing skills in media production for development” (Ryerson University 2017). Below I describe and provide links to some of the media productions students produced in this course.

## Content

### #DiscoverDagoretti campaign for AMREF Health Africa’s Dagoretti Child in Need Program

The students proposed and executed a series of short social media videos. Each video showcases one child who uses the Dagoretti drop-in centre and frames them as someone who is fulfilling their potential as an artist, as a chef, as a musician, etc. In total, six videos were produced as part of the series:

- Rose: “I am an Artist” - <https://youtu.be/mKCwoMHVVT0>

- Kete: “I am a Role Model” - <https://youtu.be/ISATgl14shM>
- Victor: “I am a Musician” - <https://youtu.be/YORsXXhuIkC>

## Saying NO to the Cut

This is a 12-minute documentary about the practice of Female Genital Mutilation among the Maasai people of Kenya, and Amref Health Africa’s programs to help end the illegal practice: <https://youtu.be/FGANVC0Pc94>.

## Honduras: The Second Story

This 12-minute documentary shares the stories of three inspiring young students of El Hogar Agricultural School in Honduras: <https://youtu.be/UzJkbp70Ny4>.

## RTA Humanitarian Media: El Hogar

These three videos document the experiences of young adults volunteering at El Hogar, and organization that provides homes and school for impoverished and orphaned children in Honduras.

- Chapter 1: <https://youtu.be/zmTjXye7ArY>
- Chapter 2: [https://youtu.be/FTY9\\_P1OAt4](https://youtu.be/FTY9_P1OAt4)
- Chapter 3: <https://youtu.be/FwVJFpSr9ys>

## Student Feedback

All students who participated in the three iterations of this course were asked to provide summative feedback about their experience. It is difficult to encapsulate the range of positive feelings students expressed about their international experience. In general, most students described their experience as “life changing”. Students grew as people, and, interestingly, developed insights about their own culture by having experienced a very different one. Below is a sample of the feedback that students wrote

when surveyed about their experience a few weeks after returning from Honduras in 2015:

- "I understand now what a powerful tool media is...it can be used to do good in the world and not just for mindless entertainment."
- "This trip helped me understand what I'm passionate about and what I want to do with my career."
- "I'm turning my cell phone off in class now because I'm aware of what a privilege it is to even have access to education."
- "I'm noticing that other students are interested in what we did, and I feel like we're inspiring others to do something similar or get involved in causes that matter to them."
- "Having worked with animals on a farm I now realize how disconnected we are from our food...I'm making more deliberate choices about what I eat."
- "We take so many things for granted here...water, access to media, education...it's too easy for us to get wrapped up in 'first world problems' that aren't really problems at all."

## Lessons Learned

I am sure I could come up with several dozen if not hundreds of lessons learned, big and small, after having developed, run, and refined three challenging international trips and assisted with the planning and preparation of a fourth. Below I address what I feel are the most important lessons learned.

### Work with an Established, Trusted International Partner

The ideal partner is one with an established reputation in international development with a history of ethical and effective work. Such organizations will be running projects and programs that draw on best practices in community/international development and engage

the host community in decision-making about direction and goals. Do not ask your students to come up with their own development project idea, as doing so will only engender a "white savior complex" and other colonialist ideas about how the Global North can 'help' the Global South. Beware of for-profit "voluntourism" agencies, which commodify a feel-good experience of "making a difference" while accruing their profits in the Global North and maintaining what McGloin & Georgeou (2016) call a "hegemonic discourse of need."

The organization must be willing to collaborate with you to create a customized itinerary that suits the needs of the students, the timeframe and requirements of the course, and, importantly, the needs of the host community. Note that some agencies that have established service volunteer programs may not be willing to adapt the program to your needs; for example, the agency we worked with in Honduras had had many service volunteers visit and work at their schools for a one-week period, but were hesitant to take us on for a two-week period as it was outside of their normal operations. Two weeks would have allowed us to create much better media productions for their organization. Additionally, we were expected to do the usual labour service work that they asked of all their visiting volunteer teams: we spent a good chunk of our precious production days repairing pigpens! We were happy to do that work, but it was not ideal for doing the best possible job on the documentaries we were there to produce for the organization.

Find an organization with which you can work on many projects going forward. For various reasons it was necessary to work with a different agency for each of the three first trips, which necessitated a lot of ground work at the outset. This included researching the organization, researching the country and its travel and safety requirements, meeting with stakeholders to set out expectations and responsibilities, etc. Establishing a long-term partnership with one agency will save doing this time-consuming work every time a trip is planned and grow trust between the partners over time.

## Be Aware of the Pitfalls of Volunteer Tourism

“Africa has provided a space onto which white egos can conveniently be projected. It is a liberated space in which the usual rules do not apply: a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied. Many have done it under the banner of “making a difference.”

(Cole 2012, para. 13)

It is easy to get caught up in the idea of “doing good” without having explored the potentially negative effects of “voluntourism”: that the presence of volunteer labour may decrease work opportunities in host communities, promote dependency, and result in poor outcomes (Guttentag 2009); that volunteer tourism may ‘reinforce the paradigm that the poor of developing countries require the help of affluent westerners to induce development’ (McGloin & Georgeou 2016); and that many overseas volunteering opportunities may involve giving untrained volunteers unregulated access to children in schools or orphanages (Birrell 2010). Do your due diligence to ensure your planned experience does not contribute to these problems and feed into a sense of “white saviour complex” (Bandyopadhyay 2019, Cole 2012, and others). Be sure to discuss these issues with your students—it is an excellent opportunity for students to apply critical thinking and analysis and consider alternate viewpoints.

## Ensure Application of Program-Specific Knowledge and Skills

It is easy to find overseas volunteering opportunities that involve doing construction work on public infrastructure such as a school or working with orphans. However, both of these activities can be problematic, as noted above. Seek volunteer opportunities that allow students to apply the knowledge and skills that they are obtaining at school in a real-world setting. The first trip to Ghana to begin building a community radio station was related

to our Media Production program, but other than having sourced equipment for the radio station, most of the time there was spent on construction work and interacting with school children. On subsequent trips, students were taking on the role of independent media producers, contracted to create professional-level media productions that could be used to enhance public awareness of specific development issues and our partner organization’s work. This role was more aligned with the desired learning outcomes of the Media Production program and thus was a more successful trip for the students and resulted in less problematic interactions with the local community.

## Understand the Barriers to Participation for Students

Money is the primary barrier when it comes to overseas travel. The total cost per student to take the Media for International Development course in Kenya in 2017 was over \$4,000 CDN, a sum well beyond the means of many students. Without subsidies, only students from relatively wealthy families will participate: this is an ongoing issue of fair access to international learning opportunities for all students. If subsidies or scholarships are available, these should be mentioned at the initial call for participation lest students rule out even attending the information session, thinking that they could never afford to go on such a trip. Check with your institution’s International Office, which hopefully keeps track of various sources of funding for students. Another important barrier for consideration is disability. For example, a student who uses a mobility aid should be accommodated appropriately during travel to a remote destination. Even specific dietary requirements could prevent a student from being able to participate.

## Be Aware of Physical and Emotional Challenges

International travel of this nature is challenging for many reasons. Emotionally, students may experience

homesickness and culture shock. They will encounter people living in conditions the students may not have seen before and may struggle with negative feelings of anxiety, sadness, or helplessness. Physically, students may dislike the available food or have difficulty adapting to the climatic conditions, and may experience gastrointestinal issues that commonly arise during travel. The combination of these factors can lead to problems ranging from irritability and short tempers to more serious issues such as dehydration, heat exhaustion, and depression. A student has fainted from heat exhaustion, another has been treated in hospital for hypocalcemia (a result of her not eating much because she did not like the food that was provided, but did not say anything so as not to be troublesome), and another has sprained an ankle. Supervisors must be vigilant, looking for early signs of any of the problems outlined above. Be prepared with strategies for mitigation, not the least of which is having a suitcase full of first aid supplies and various medications.

### Pre-Screen Student Participants

Given the challenges listed above, it is imperative to pre-screen students to ensure that they understand the implications and responsibilities associated with international travel, and that they are mature, resilient people who can deal with those challenges. For this course, enrolment is by permission only, and students are first required to attend an info session, fill in a questionnaire, be interviewed in person, and provide references. These measures were put in place to try to understand the student's motivation for wanting to participate. There will be students whose motivation is to "help those people and try to put a smile on their face," a sentiment that indicates a perception of an asymmetrical power relationship between the visiting students and members of the host community, based on the idea that "those people" desperately need our help, and that our help will be rewarded with gratitude (Dobrovlny 2012, as cited in McGloin & Georgeou 2016). There will be students whose sole motivation is a trophy—being able to show off selfies taken in an "exotic" place to impress their friends (Benham Reddick & Desjardins, 2013) or to have something

impressive to add to their resume. These students are harder to detect at the outset but are inevitably a burden during travel when they turn out to be a poor team member, do not want to do the work, or break off from the group to pursue their own individual goals. Read between the lines when evaluating student candidates and err on the side of caution. While it is noble to want to include any student that expresses a desire to participate, including an inappropriate student can have much greater negative consequences on a challenging overseas trip than in a standard classroom course, given the fact that the students must spend an extensive amount of time together under challenging circumstances. Choosing appropriate students and orienting them appropriately can result in a co-operative, supportive, and well-bonded group that experiences minimal conflict.

After holding an information session for the students during which they learn about the expectations and activities in the course, the intended travel destination, the development programs of the partner organization, and about the challenges and risks of participating on such a trip, the students are asked to fill in an online questionnaire, which included the following questions:

1. Have you done any international travel before?
2. Why do you want to go on this trip?
3. What makes you a good candidate for the trip? Be specific about your skills, qualities, strengths, background, experience, certifications, etc. that may apply.
4. In what areas do you think you "need work" to be a better candidate to go on this trip?
5. Indicate three things about going on this trip that would be most challenging to you personally and why.
6. Are there any of the expectations and responsibilities listed above that you may not be able to meet for any reason? If yes, please elaborate.

7. Provide two references that can vouch for your suitability to take this course and go on this trip.

Selected applicants are then invited to an interview, during which they were asked to elaborate on some of the questions above, as well as talk about what strategies they might employ if they themselves or one of their peers experienced some emotional, physical, or psychological distress while traveling. Students were asked to provide the names and contact info of two professors who could vouch for the student. A description of the types of challenges the student would encounter was provided to the referees, who were told that we were “looking for “motivated, mature-minded students who get along well with others and enjoy a challenge” and that a student's strengths but also their weaknesses are of interest. Referees were also asked to “identify any concerns such as not meeting deadlines, lack of motivation, interpersonal concerns, etc.” as this detailed information is important to make the best possible choice of participants for this challenging trip. (Author, personal communication, Nov 14, 2016). Referees are generally candid and offer insight that can be useful in selecting candidates.

### Fight for the Resources Needed

Internationalization is a popular strategic direction at many post-secondary institutions. However, it does not necessarily follow that your institution will provide adequate funding and support to implement a course such as this. In order to properly resource this type of international learning experience, you and your institution should be aware of the following considerations.

The cost per student to run this course is very high. I was only able to accept between 10 and 14 students into the course, depending on the resources available in the host community. You may be asked to find efficiencies of scale, but these may be impossible depending on your destination. My trips were limited by the size and availability of vehicles and drivers for transportation, available accommodations in remote rural areas, and access to

food and clean water. Furthermore, supervising large numbers of students on remote, challenging trips is not advisable given the risks and the enormous burden of responsibility on the faculty member, even if there are cost efficiencies to be had.

This particular course design, which included a full schedule of weekly classes in addition to a two-week trip, not to mention the significant hours spent on initial planning, preparation, and student screening, can be three times the time commitment of a typical course for the instructor. The faculty member should be compensated accordingly (whether through course release or other means), and the students should be granted an appropriate number of course credits given the hours they will be actively engaged in course activities.

Administrative support is needed. Making travel bookings, collecting documents and fees from students, paying invoices, and other administrative tasks should be handled by administrative staff, allowing the faculty member to focus on delivering the course. Ultimately this saves money, rather than having the faculty member spend their (often highly-paid) time on these tasks.

Given the current focus on internationalization in higher education, your institution is likely to be keen on having you implement this kind of international learning experience. They will be more than happy to publicize it in all of their public-facing media as good PR for the institution. They will point to your course and the students' experiences when they are soliciting significant donations. However, institutions have taken advantage of a faculty member's passion and their willingness to do the extra work that offering an international learning experience entails, while not delivering adequate support. Develop a contract with your institution that includes a clear budget and lays out specific support must be provided.

### Conclusion

International learning experiences are rewarding, but not easy—particularly those that are focused on development initiatives and take place in remote areas

of the Global South. You will need to look out for students' well-being, and, yes, probably make a trip or two to the hospital. You will need to resolve disputes among jet-lagged students in a fair and collaborative way, while feeling jet-lagged and travel-worn yourself. You will need to stay calm when the pleasure boat you are in on hippo-filled Lake Naivasha hits a submerged log that punches a hole in the hull and the boat begins to take on water quickly. You will need to stay collected when you are sure the barely-visible dirt track full of holes the size of swimming pools you're traveling on could not possibly be the way to the local accommodations and you are certain your spine could not take one more jolt – and by the way, did we buy enough bottled water? – because it is a long way back to that town to get more. You will need to detour to your national embassy to replace a lost passport that eventually turns up in a forgotten pocket of a knapsack. And you will need to figure something out when you are a million miles off the beaten track and one of the students tells you that when she said her favourite food is pizza, what she really meant was she will not eat anything BUT pizza. If you are willing and able to do so, you will undoubtedly be rewarded with cherished memories, strong social bonds with the people with whom you shared these extraordinary experiences, and the satisfaction of knowing that you helped open the minds of young people to a wider world of possibility.

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