

Professional international service learning as an international service learning opportunity appropriate for graduate or professional students

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Graduate and professional schools are increasingly using short-term international study abroad courses as one way for internationalizing their curriculum. While international service learning can be a means for improving students' engagement in international learning experiences and providing a structure for learning, it is difficult to design meaningful international service learning projects appropriate for graduate or professional students that can be completed during a short-term study abroad course. This article introduces professional international service learning as an approach to international service learning on short-term international study abroad courses that is appropriate for students studying at the graduate level.

Keywords: study abroad; graduate education; professional education; international service learning; short-term trips; internationalization of higher education

Graduate and professional programs in a variety of disciplines are increasingly offering short-term international study courses for students as a means to internationalize graduate school education. In many of these short-term courses, international service learning projects are included as a means to provide a structured way of increasing the engagement and learning of students, as well as to give back to the countries or communities being visited. This paper introduces *professional* international service learning, or service learning in which students provide service to a profession or professional organization, as an approach to service learning on short-term international study abroad courses that is appropriate for students studying at the graduate level.

BACKGROUND

The past decade has witnessed a dramatic growth in the number of colleges and universities offering study abroad programs. Today, about 223,000 US college students are engaged in some form of study abroad, immersing themselves in diverse cultures, language, and practices (Anderson, Leigh Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2005). Researchers have demonstrated a wide variety of benefits from study abroad. Studies have found that students engaged in study abroad programs are more likely to have higher levels of intercultural proficiency and global engagement than students who do not (Lindsey, 2005; Doyle, 2009; Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic, & Jon, 2009; Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012), though studies have also found that design of the program matters in the degree of intercultural proficiency (Vande Berg, 2009). However, for many students, particularly graduate students and non-traditional students, full semester study or long-term field placements are not possible because of time, cost and/or family obligations. There has, consequently, been a growth in the amount of shorter-term study abroad options, with about 55 percent of study abroad experiences now of eight weeks or less duration (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). These short-term

international study abroad courses are increasingly seen as a method to allow greater student access to international opportunities. Research has found that, even though short-term, the programs can result in significant gains in global engagement and global values (Bell & Anscombe, 2013; Fry, Paige, & Stallman, 2009; Vande Berg et al., 2012), particularly if they have a structured facilitation component to guide the learners (Vande Berg, 2009).

In spite of the many benefits, a difficulty in short-term learning experiences is that they often do not allow for meaningful service learning opportunities for graduate students.

Service learning is typically defined as structured community service that meets the self-defined needs of a local community, is coordinated through an education authority, is integrated into the curriculum, and includes a structured method for reflection on the service (Cone & Harris, 1996). Service learning has its theoretical roots in experiential learning, as discussed by Dewey, who argued in *How we think* (1933), that education should be grounded in experience. These experiences produce changes in the learner that then, through reflection and feedback can result in deeper learning (Kolb, 1984). Much of the research and discussion on service learning focuses on the importance of meaningful reflection in the design of service learning (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997).

An additional aspect that Dewey (1933) discusses in regards to experiential learning is the importance of the principle of continuity of experience, which signifies that experiences should build on previous experiences. Thus, service learning should be designed at the appropriate level of based on previous experiences (Giles & Eyler, 1994). This principle requires that experiential education involve high quality experimental activities that lead towards learning and growth.

The emphasis in the scholarship about service learning has primarily been at the undergraduate level. However, many graduate level programs have incorporated some forms of service learning for years. For example, many graduate professional programs require community-based internships or practica that are designed for student skill development, such as Master of Social Work (MSW) programs which require extensive community-based field practicums coupled with reflection seminars (Lemieux & Allen, 2007) or Master of Public Affairs (MPA) programs which require practica focusing on real-world issues coupled with reflection (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001). There has been much disciplinary research into the success of various internships and field placements (Brescia, Mullins, & Miller, 2009; Cross & Grant, 2010; Raskin, 2014), but little research into the effectiveness of graduate or professional level service learning focused on internships or field placements as service learning (Lu & Lambright, 2010).

A review of literature of professional service learning in Public Affairs programs found that the key conceptual aspects of service learning explicated at the undergraduate level remain at the graduate and professional levels, such as the importance of linking the service activity with learning objectives and the central roles of reflection and feedback as critical for learning (Imperial, Perry, & Katula, 2007). However, at the graduate level, the learning goals are typically more advanced, the reflection is in greater depth, and the skill level is higher. The types of learning experiences differ from those of undergraduates, according to Dewey (1933), because they are at a different place on the learning continuum.

International service learning is essentially service learning that occurs when students are studying in an international location. It is a way to improve students' engagement in their international experience, to provide a structure for learning in an international setting that includes a reflective piece, and a way to meet community-defined needs. International service learning is increasingly seen as a way to improve students' engagement in their international learning experience and to provide a structure for learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). It can be the type of structured activity

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upon which learner facilitation is built. This type of learning is especially appropriate for professional programs that typically rely on field-based experiences.

While international service learning can increase students' engagement, there are also serious concerns that, if it is not done with careful planning, it could have negative impacts for communities, such as community groups competing for the service projects or the service project reinforcing the notion that development requires outside donors (Crabtree, 2008). Similarly, there are concerns that service learning opportunities run the risk of being logistically burdensome for some agencies, especially in the form of staff-time needed to coordinate service learning projects (Bushouse, 2005; Eckert, Luqmani, Newell, Qurashi, & Wagner, 2013). Likewise, there is a danger that participation in international student learning can work to highlight the distances between students and international communities rather than help bridge them (Grusky, 2000). Crabtree (2008) has suggested that a way to help minimize these potential negatives of international service learning is to design service projects that focus on building relationships and developing the critical consciousness of all participants.

For short-term international study abroad courses, international service learning can be even more difficult, because it is difficult to build ongoing relationships during a short-term course. While there are many opportunities for international volunteering, if a volunteer opportunity is to be characterized as service learning, it has to be carefully structured to both meet the needs of communities and provide structured opportunities for student engagement and reflection. In a brief two- or three-week study abroad tour, service learning can involve a day or two of providing community service in a setting relevant to the course's educational goals, with structured opportunities for students to reflect. For example, an undergraduate international study tour focusing on educational issues might include, as part of its tour, a day spent volunteering at a local school, teaching modules or tutoring school children, coupled with another day spent painting the exterior of a school building in conjunction with local teachers. This community service experience could be coupled with course reflection time in which students could meet with teachers or students in the host country to discuss educational issues and pedagogy; and time discussing experiences with other students doing their community service with a focus on processing their experiences and gaining an understanding of the educational system operating in their country of origin. This might also involve a reflective journal, in which students are instructed to link course readings with their own experiences in the community, and meetings upon returning home to further process their experiences. Reflecting back to Dewey's principle of continuity, this type of international student learning is appropriate for undergraduate students who might have had little or no international or service learning experiences.

Many fields, such as public affairs (Ryan, 2010) and social work (Engstrom & Jones, 2007) are now promoting in-depth international service learning experiences for graduate students as critical for student development. Unfortunately, for many fields, it is more difficult to incorporate graduate level international service learning projects that meet both Dewey's principle of continuity and are congruent with graduate level curriculum during short-term study abroad experiences. Some fields, in which students learn highly advanced but discrete skills might, in a fairly straightforward way, be able to have graduate students participate in a meaningful international service learning project on a short overseas program. For example, advanced students in the health sciences might be able to set up mobile surgery clinics or health screening clinics in which they meet a community-defined need, use students' advanced skills, and have opportunities for reflection and feedback. However, in other disciplines that rely on more complex or longer-term community relationships, such as social work, public affairs, business, or educational administration, the international service learning

opportunities for a short-term study tour are not as clear-cut and may not build appropriately on the previous experiences of graduate students, directly relate to the graduate curriculum of that field, or make good use of the advanced skills of the graduate students. For example, it is not uncommon for service learning projects on short-term international study abroad courses to involve: masters of business administration students in service learning projects in which they plant trees, build latrines or assemble wheelchairs; or MSW students in projects in which they visit with children in an orphanage or paint a school. While these projects might be somewhat related to their fields, provide opportunities for meaningful reflection, engage with the community, and be quite rewarding experiences for participants; they are not at the level of learning of graduate education. In fact, these are often the same types of projects requiring the same types of skills that undergraduate or even high school students complete on study abroad or mission trips. Thus, these types of activities do not meet Dewey's principle of continuity of experience and might not result in the amount of learning appropriate for graduate students.

One solution to this problem is to build more meaningful or relevant international service learning opportunities for graduate students on short-term international study abroad courses. However, it is important that these be constructed appropriately. While involving graduate students in more meaningful projects, such as civic education or participatory action research projects, might seem more closely related to a graduate level experience, in a short-term international study abroad course these projects run into the danger of not having real engagement. Having long-term meaningful relationships between the partner agency and the academic institution can mitigate this danger. Other types of appropriate graduate level service learning could include a day of engagement at a free clinic, the development of policy analysis and recommendations for a non-governmental organization, technical assistance on grant proposals, program development proposals, needs assessments, business planning or program evaluations for government, educational or nongovernment organizations. For all of these types of service learning opportunities, it is critical for students to have extensive pre-trip preparation, to have the service learning opportunity relate directly to learning objectives, and to have critical reflection built into their service activities.

PROFESSIONAL INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING

Another approach is to view the concept of international service learning in a slightly different matter to include the concept of *professional international service learning* as a type of service to the community. Professional international service learning is similar to other types of international service learning. But, instead of providing service to a local community, students provide a service to a particular professional community in a host country. A professional community could be a professional association, such as a local or national association, a graduate program in a university, or other similar entities. Professional international service learning could include developing a continuing education workshop for local professionals, presenting at a policy forum held by a professional association, helping develop a survey or instrument for a professional association, or helping with the development of accreditation guidelines for a professional association.

Like other types of service learning, the learning opportunity in professional service learning must be a structured activity that is integrated into the curriculum, and include a structured method for reflection on the service. In addition, the professional community must be involved in identifying the particular need that the graduate or professional service learning student will address, which will ensure that the project is relevant to the professional community. This type of international service learning is particularly appropriate for graduate students in professional programs. While

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professional international service learning activities exist, there has been virtually no attention placed on this type of international service learning activity.

The benefits of professional international service learning are broad. For the professional community, this type of service learning allows the professional community to participate in an international exchange or receive the technical assistance that they desire. Professionals or professional associations often have difficulties getting appropriate professional development opportunities, so this could be a benefit to them. Further, the service that they are receiving is very low-cost because graduate students donate their time and effort. Another benefit is that service to the profession does not necessarily imply hierarchy between nations, as is often implied in traditional international service learning. International exchanges of information are often considered useful for professionals in general. Thus, students studying abroad from higher income countries could do an international professional service learning project in another higher income country or a lower income country, or students from a lower income country could do international professional service learning in a higher income country. Finally, the local professional community is able to benefit from increased networking opportunities.

The potential benefits for graduate students of international professional student learning projects are also broad. First, professional service learning draws directly on the skills graduate students are learning in their graduate program. A professional service learning project can help students focus their learning before, during and after their short-term international study abroad course, because this type of service learning will require extensive pre-trip preparation, focused attention while they are on their trip, and wrap-up activities likely after their trip. Second, professional service learning can help build students intercultural communication skills because they not only provide professional education or technical assistance to other professionals, they also provide assistance cross-culturally. Thirdly, an international service learning opportunity allows students to have an opportunity to network with international colleagues. Finally, because professional service learning is at the appropriate level of the experiential learning continuum for graduate students, it is likely to promote the greatest level of learning for students.

The main disadvantage for graduate students is that this type of professional service learning disallows students the opportunity to be involved with regular community members. However, as noted above, short-term attempts to engage with local communities can be detrimental to communities because real engagement is unlikely to occur in just a few days, and requires more long-term commitments at relationship building. Professional international service learning attempts to avoid this problem because professional types of engagement are more common in shorter timeframes, such as at conferences or trainings. The following section provides examples of two professional international service learning projects.

EXAMPLES OF PROFESSIONAL INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING

The first example of professional international service learning is a social development conference to a professional organization that served as the culminating project for a two-and-a-half week MSW tour from the US to Namibia. A second example is of a professional international service learning project that took place in a two-week international social welfare policy study abroad course from US to South Korea, involving the presentation of policy forums at two universities.

Professional service learning in Namibia

The topic of the course was “social development and social policy in Namibia.” Eighteen students from the University of Minnesota participated in the short-term international study abroad course. The professional international service learning project for the course was the development of a one-day social development conference to the Namibian Social Work Association (NASWA). One of the faculty leaders of the short-term international study abroad course had spent a year in Namibia and had a professional relationship with the president of NASWA. Prior to the trip, the instructors gave multiple lectures to students about social development in Namibia. The instructors also collaborated with the president of NASWA to develop an agenda for a one-day social development conference.

The students brainstormed topics that they would be interested in presenting, and then the president of NASWA chose the topics that would be most relevant to professional social workers in Namibia and added additional topics. The MSW students participating in the short-term international study abroad course prepared their presentations for the conference before leaving for Namibia. At the beginning of the two-and-a-half week trip, MSW students visited over twenty government ministries and NGOs. During these agency visits, the MSW students needed to learn more about Namibia for their conference presentation. Towards the end of the trip, the students had a day to work on “Namibianizing” their presentations. They made presentations at the conference on the very last day of their study trip.

The full-day conference drew over 80 participants from across Namibia. It included six student presentations, a key-note presentation, and several opportunities for small-group discussions with both the US graduate students and the Namibian social workers. The evaluations of the conference from the attendees were positive, and the president of NASWA commended the students on how well they Namibianized their presentations.

The students wrote in their journals about their experiences at the conference. A month after returning to the US, students and the US organizers discussed the conference at a wrap-up meeting. Students noted that fretting about their presentations and dealing with the additional stress of preparing for the conference added to the short-term international study abroad course; that is, it differed from a sightseeing vacation. Students also discussed how the preparations for their presentations added focus to their trip and greatly increased their learning.

Professional service learning in South Korea

The course was entitled, “Health, Culture, and Social Welfare Policy in South Korea.” A total of nine students and two professors from the University of Minnesota participated in the short-term international study abroad course. The course was developed through partnerships with Seoul City and Busan Metropolitan City Governments; and the Schools of Social Work at Ewha Women’s University and Busan National University. The short-term international study abroad course’s professional international service learning project was the development of two Policy Forums that students delivered to the two School of Social Work Programs in Korea. One of the professors who led the international course had a long history of research collaboration with the professors at the two universities and negotiated the development of the policy forums, including the format of the forum, duration of each presentation, and overall an agenda for the forum. At pre-departure meetings, the two course instructors offered four sessions on international social policy, the impacts of culture on policy formulation, and social welfare policy in Korea. The nine students formed four groups, and two groups presented policy presentations to social work graduate students, faculty and

other community members at Ewha Women's University in Seoul and Busan National University in Busan.

The MSW students enrolled in the short-term international study abroad course planned and organized their presentations as a group prior to leaving for South Korea. Upon arriving in South Korea, the students visited more than 25 government ministries, social welfare centres, and NGOs. During each visit, students were given numerous lectures on social welfare policies that were relevant to each student group's policy topic. With the information given, each student group added new information into their presentations or revised their existing presentations during breaks or at meetings at night. Each forum lasted an hour-and-a-half, with students presenting their work, followed by a lively question and answer session, after which there was an opportunity to socialize informally. The policy forum not only enabled students to learn more about and contextualize the policy they presented, but also offered an opportunity to build their professional networks. The professors at both universities discussed the value of the students' presentations to their own students and faculty members, noting the benefits gained by students and faculty in learning about the policy content, and observing the professional speaking style of the US students. They also discussed the value of the cultural exchange.

The MSW students in the short-term international study abroad course also discussed the value of the project. Their feedback noted one limitation of the experience, which was the limited English proficiency among South Korean students at one of the universities. This inhibited active discussion of the policy issue among some students. Another limitation of the policy forums was that only the US students made presentations, and it would have been beneficial if the Korean students or faculty had also made presentations. Despite the limitations, the policy forums at both universities were excellent opportunities for the graduate students on the study abroad tour to learn about policy.

Characteristics of international service learning in examples

Both of the above examples demonstrate how a professional service learning activity can be integrated into a short-term international study abroad course. In both examples, the professional community in the host location for the students' visit was involved in providing input into the content and format of the activity to ensure that it met the local professional community's needs. In the Namibian example, this involved a national professional association and had a country-wide focus on professionals working in the field. In the South Korean example, this involved two large universities and focused on graduate students and faculty.

While the service learning opportunity involved some costs, in both cases the costs were minimal and the professional service learning event was integrated into already-planned activities. For example, the Namibian social work association used the conference as a regular training event and, in South Korean, these policy forums were integrated into the academic calendar.

Both professional service learning activities related directly to the course content of the respective courses. In both courses, there were structured opportunities for reflection, led by instructors, of their service learning opportunity. Both courses required students to write in journals reflecting upon their experiences, and also had formal discussions and feedback about their professional service learning experience at a wrap-up meeting upon return from their international study abroad trip.

In both cases, the instructors included one instructor with strong connections with the host country. Both course activities were also at the level of experience appropriate for graduate students who had

already been engaged in various other projects in communities in their earlier education and in pre-graduate school experiences. The instructors of both courses believed that having the professional service learning activity as a key part of their trips enhanced students' engagement throughout the trips. In government agency and NGO visits prior to the presentations, students would ask questions and engage in discussions with agency workers and community members about the topics they had already researched, and were able to integrate their new learning into their presentations. Their engagement over issues during their visits was not just for the sake of their own personal learning, but also for the sake of improving the presentations they would be making to professionals in the community.

CONCLUSION

Professional international service learning is one method for adding a service learning component into a short-term international study abroad course for graduate or professional students. It is a method that allows graduate students to apply their advanced skills and knowledge to a project that gives back to the community, albeit a professional community, and is the type of international service learning project which can be completed successfully and appropriately during a short-term visit. This type of international service learning activity can increase the value of a short-term program by having a significant, task related to the course that students could focus upon in preparing for a trip, during the trip, and during structured reflection. In addition, it gives students the opportunity to engage in service to the country they are visiting.

While professional international service learning is limited in that it focuses only on engagement with other professionals rather than with local communities, it is an appropriate type of service learning activity for students at the graduate level on a short-term study abroad trip. Certainly, in more long-term international study opportunities, graduate student learning should involve meaningful engagement with appropriate communities in a way that is suited to their field of study. However, professional international service learning allows for engagement that is quite appropriate for graduate students on short-term study abroad courses.

Because professional international service learning is a new area, there is a need for research to further explore the effectiveness of international service learning. Findings from such research can lead to the development of design principles for these types of experiences.

An important area of inquiry is to ascertain which types of professional service learning activities already exist, and which types lead to the greatest level of learning and growth in graduate students. This is a very broad area of inquiry, and might vary depending on academic or professional discipline. However, cross-disciplinary research into this topic could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of professional international service learning.

A second area of research is to determine if and how previous experiences of graduate students effect professional international service learning outcomes. While graduate students might, as a whole, have greater experience on which to build than undergraduate students, the particulars of these experiences might vary considerably. For example, some graduate students might have extensive domestic work experience, such as working as a social worker for 10 years before returning for a MSW, but have never left the country. Other graduate students might have substantial international experience, such as studying internationally, but little community or work experience before entering their graduate program. If the principle of continuity matters in professional international service learning, it is important to understand how these varied experiences effect outcomes.

In addition, there is a need for research into how to appropriately incorporate reflection and feedback into service professional international service learning. Finally, a benefit of professional international service learning is the potential development of ongoing partnerships between professionals.

Research into these four areas will provide information needed to develop guidelines for appropriate professional international service learning.

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