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Equity in International Experiential Learning: Assessing Benefits to Students and Host Communities

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This research uses participant observation and other qualitative methods to evaluate whether faculty-led short-term study abroad programs can successfully carry out responsible 'fair trade', and thereby substantially benefit not only students but also the host communities. The research draws insights by comparing two experiential learning courses taught in South Africa and Dominica. Results suggest that students benefit in various transformative ways in both courses, by applying sustainability and development studies concepts to real-life service and hands-on learning in cross-cultural situations. The Dominica course yields more host community benefits, however, because of the instructors' long-term commitments to reciprocal partnerships and equitable engagement. The paper concludes with recommendations for enhancing the impacts of short-term study abroad on students and, especially, on their host communities.

Introduction

A key task for academia in the 21st Century is to expose students to socially responsible ways to address global problems. It is no longer seen as adequate to merely lecture on such issues as sustainability, social justice, and development issues in theoretical terms inside the classroom. Increasingly, faculty and administrators have invested in study abroad so that students can directly engage the world, in hopes of encouraging active and socially responsible global citizenship (Lewin, 2009). Because many of the new study abroad programs are short-term (less than a semester; Wheeler, 2000), there is a need to scrutinize how such programs are organized and their impacts on students and hosts, so as to make them more meaningful and valuable within the time constraints. In a paper published by the Council on International Educational Exchange, Cressey and Trooboff (2005, p.3) argue that successful short-term study abroad must be both carefully planned and intense:

Seeing a foreign culture 'as a man sees flowers from a galloping horse' while useful and often educational, is not study abroad; ... As the Chinese saying instructs us, if you want to see the flower, dismount, get close to the flower, have a conversation with the flower, and learn from the flower. In study abroad this means... specific strategies [should be] in place to ensure that these conversations and this learning actually occur.

This paper follows these suggestions by focusing on identifying best practices in Faculty-Led Short-Term Study Abroad that includes service-learning activities (henceforth FLSTSA). Designing and encouraging specific best practice strategies can help to ensure high quality as programs become briefer. We hope our findings and recommendations will be of value to faculty members embarking on the development and implementation of FLSTSA and will encourage them to strive for more equitable balance between student and host community benefits.

The paper unfolds across four sections. The literature review makes connections between, and applies a variety of concepts from, scholarship associated with study abroad, international education, and civic and community engagement. The methods section describes the two case study courses and the associated qualitative methods of data gathering and analysis. The results section compares and contrasts the impacts that the two study abroad courses have had on students and host communities. The paper concludes with suggestions for organizing and teaching short-term study abroad courses so that both students and host communities benefit.

Literature Review

This research is informed by a diverse set of literatures associated with study abroad and international education and civic and community engagement in both local and foreign settings. Although these are sometimes non-overlapping literatures, we find many significant and useful connections between them. We follow Bringle, Hatcher and Holland (Bringle, Hatcher, & Holland, 2007; Bringle & Hatcher, 2010), who have defined and distinguished the concepts and pedagogic approaches listed above. For them, experiential learning combines conceptualizations, first-hand understandings, and reflections on them; in other words experiential learning:

entails the integration of (a) knowledge—the concepts, facts, and information acquired through formal learning and past experience; (b) activity—the application of knowledge to a ‘real world’ setting; and (c) reflection—the analysis and synthesis of knowledge and activity to create new knowledge (Bringle et al., 2007, Table 1).

Other key concepts from the literature may or may not apply to a particular experiential learning course. The most important of these concepts for this research are civic and community engagement, which go beyond experiential learning, to demand greater, longer-term commitments and more collaboration between universities and their host communities. For Bringle and his collaborators (2007, Table 1), civic engagement aims “to improve the quality of life in communities [and] encompasses teaching, research, and service.” Community engagement is a closely related type of collaboration, defined as involving “the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in the context of partnership and reciprocity” (Bringle, et al., 2007 Table 1). As you can see, civic and community engagement includes service learning, but also incorporates the higher order priority of benefiting the partnering communities. FLSTSA fits in the broader category of experiential learning, which can be carried out either domestically or abroad. Because this paper is concerned with the conditions under which FLSTSA not only benefits students, but also the host communities, we focus on whether a particular course achieves the level of collaboration and reciprocity associated with community or civic engagement (Maiter et al., 2008).

Study abroad has its own literature and challenges. Research by program providers reveals that even though a majority of students entering university indicate an intention to study abroad, a mere 1% of them actually participate in traditional “year abroad” programs (Wheeler, 2000). This discrepancy is commonly attributed to barriers such as costs, time constraints, or anxiety about foreign travel. In response, a broad range of programs that are faculty-led and briefer (less than a semester) have emerged, along with the associated need to maximize learning impacts within a shorter time frame. The growth in this category has been dramatic, with summer and other short-term programs now accounting for

56% of the undergraduates who study abroad (IIE, 2011; Cressey & Trooboff, 2005). As educators, we view these trends as opportunities to embark on a new era of well-organized and –conceptualized short-term experiential learning that prioritizes partnership equity (cf Lewin, 2009).

Other previous research on the evaluation of international education is also relevant to the present study. Paige and his collaborators (2009) distinguish five dimensions of global engagement as a way to measure the degree to which study abroad has significant long-term impacts on students and enhances their societal contributions. They examine civic engagement, knowledge production, philanthropy, social entrepreneurship, and voluntary simplicity in the post-travel individual. They also track subsequent education and career choices. The work aims to substantiate what was previously anecdotal evidence of study abroad benefits to students and society. Their quantitative evidence shows that “study abroad is one of the most important experiences students have in their undergraduate years” (Paige et al., 2009, p.S41), and that it often leads in measureable ways to global engagement activities and philanthropic careers in participants. These results suggest that it is all the more crucial for universities and the larger society to find creative ways to overcome the financial and other constraints against study abroad participation both by educators (trip leaders) and by students.

Study abroad programs have diversified both geographically and topically over the last decade or so, bringing a shift from the traditional focus on Europe to countries in the non-Western world. Now, fourteen of the top twenty-five destination countries are outside Europe (IIE, 2011). Study abroad is increasing in destinations with some of the most challenging health, development, sustainability, and social justice issues, such as Africa and Latin America (McMurtie, 2009). A growing number of study abroad courses address the regional and global challenges of the twenty-first century (Lewin, 2009). The two case studies selected for analysis in this paper fall into these emerging, non-traditional categories. Therefore, they provide exciting examples of ways to expose students first-hand to some of the most pressing socio-economic and environmental issues facing the world.

Indeed, particular study abroad topics are arguably more conducive to the development of global citizenship among participating students. Study abroad that incorporates lessons in social justice and an investigation of local environmental and economic challenges arguably has a particularly powerful impact on students interested in global development (Stanitski & Fuellhart, 2003). Further, “learning about sustainability issues through meetings with representatives abroad enlightens students in a way not possible [at home]” (ibid, p.203). Participatory and experiential learning also help to “develop insights into and understandings of the inter-relationships between human and physical landscapes” (ibid, p.202) that enhance study abroad learning impacts in additional ways. These attributes were among the criteria for selecting the two study abroad courses for analysis, the details of which are found in the methods section.

As the world becomes more integrated and as higher education becomes more responsive to global problems, there is a notable gap in the research literature. Previous research has primarily evaluated the impacts on students (useful literature reviews include McLeod & Wainwright, 2009 and Bringle & Hatcher, 2010). An issue that has received remarkably little scholarly attention is the impact of study abroad on the host communities (Dorado & Giles, 2004, p.126; Sandy & Holland, 2006, p.30). Other international educators have raised concerns about this shortcoming and have argued that universities have a moral

responsibility to their communities and students to act “as committed global citizens to ensure that we are carrying out our work in a way that is responsible to all parties involved” (Stephenson, 2006, p.67). Stephenson (2006, p.70) further argues that “it is imperative that we consider more systematically host cultural impact as a factor in shaping program placement and implementation choices.” Other writers share these concerns, and are also troubled by the lack of policy direction in support of equitable study abroad. Wheeler (2000, p.A74) states that there is an “absence of a national policy on the issue and a lack of agreement amongst institutions on how to prepare students for a world in which countries are growing more interdependent.” Norris and Gillespie (2009, p.383) contend that there is growing movement behind the idea that quality study abroad opportunities should be an essential component of the university experience:

Policymakers, researchers, and practitioners across most fields have called on U.S. higher education to realize its vital role in facilitating the international experience and skill-building of more American students. They ask higher education to support and refine existing education abroad programs, as well as design new opportunities that transport participants well beyond the role of a tourist, educational consumer, or isolated and unengaged American abroad.

However, finding ways to meet the goal of equity through FLSTSA goes beyond providing quality programs that transform students, as taxing a task as that is. It requires systematic changes to FLSTSA that elevate host communities to a role as sustained partners, whose voices help to assess and shape the programs. This crucial point is elaborated in the following sections.

Methods

Selection of the Two Case Studies

The authors have for many years been involved as participants, observers, or leaders of study abroad courses in South Africa, Dominica, and several other countries on four continents. The research reported in this paper compares two study abroad courses that were selected as relatively strong examples of engaged and experiential study abroad that address difficult social and economic issues. We chose two courses that are fairly representative of recent trends in study abroad in the Global South, both in terms of the locales and the social science subject matter (social science is the leading field of study for US students going abroad; IIE, 2011). Both courses emphasize experiential learning, service learning, and engaging their host communities. These features represent emerging study abroad themes, as global citizenship has become an alternative to the more traditional goal of inter-cultural competence (Kiely, 2010).

While we focus here on two selected courses, we at the same time have a wider range of our study abroad experiences in mind, and these contribute to our assessments, recommendations, and conclusions. In particular, we have been for years interested in the extent to which study abroad courses include deep reflection, community engagement, and rich interaction between students and their hosts. Indeed, our ultimate interest is not in any particular FLSTSA course. It is instead broader and more general, namely to identify features of service-oriented study abroad courses that are worth replicating in support of the goal of substantial and equitable benefits for both students and hosts.

As is well known, South Africa has been ravaged by HIV/AIDS. A principal objective of

the selected South Africa course is to understand cultural beliefs about dying, experiences of grief, and responses to tragedy, and to compare them to those found in the US. Concepts related to the understanding of death, hospice care, and the socio-cultural impacts of the HIV/AIDS epidemic are integrated with site visits and with insights from local cultural informants. The students engage with South Africans in villages and urban townships affected by HIV/AIDS, and assist at orphanages, the resident children of which have experienced adult death first-hand. These are particularly intense and challenging course themes and empirical settings that are likely to be powerful and life-changing for students. While our understanding of South Africa and the course aims led us to expect profound impacts on students, we knew little *a priori* about how the interactions were received by the South African host communities.

To undertake comparative research for this project, the first author sought another FLSTSA course that addresses pressing social issues and in which a sustained, multi-year effort has been made to develop equitable host community benefits, as is the case in the Dominica course. The Dominica course curriculum is not directly about essential life and death issues, although it is about how people meet the challenges of making a living under difficult economic circumstances. The focus is on sustainable livelihoods and the related potential of ecotourism as a local development strategy. The course applies development studies ideas and extends them by examining village-level grassroots initiatives. Themes covered in the classroom, such as the connections between geography and history, globalization and agriculture, and alternative forms of tourism, are reinforced through community engagement activities both before and during the time in Dominica.

Four Qualitative Methods

Data for this paper were gathered for both courses in parallel fashion through a combination of four qualitative methods: participant observation, interviews with host community members, questionnaires administered to students, and analysis of written reflections by students. Each method generated its own qualitative data useful for assessing student and/or host community impacts. Let us briefly elaborate on each of these four methods.

Participant observation was chosen as a data-gathering method because we believed that there was much to be learned about benefits by experiencing the courses first-hand and by closely studying the interactions between host community members and students (Whitney & Clayton, 2010). The first author therefore participated as a student/researcher in both courses. Extending from her long-term involvement with civic engagement and international education in South Africa, she joined the students on the South Africa course in the summer of 2009. She lived within the receiving community for more than two weeks in order to assess the history of volunteerism at the project site, and to assist in preparation for the student visit. She participated in the service activities as a member of the course, and joined students when they went to stay overnight at an off-site location before they returned for the second day of volunteering. The first author participated in all aspects of the Dominica course during the spring of 2010. This participation not only included the study abroad trip, but also the many pre-trip activities designed to prepare students for the study abroad experience and to foster reciprocal relationships between the university and host communities. As elaborated in the results section, the South Africa course did not include such pre-trip activities. All of these course components yielded rich participant observations of student-faculty-community member interactions.

Host community members were interviewed during and/or after experiential learning activities with the students in both courses. The first author obtained the permission of all participants to be interviewed. The project followed a protocol for conducting ethical research that involves human subjects from national guidelines for ethical research articulated by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative or CITI (<https://www.citiprogram.org/aboutus.asp>). She deployed an audio device to capture verbatim responses during interviews with host community members that could be transcribed and analyzed later. In total, fifteen interviews with community members in South Africa and eleven in Dominica were completed. The interview questions paralleled suggestions from Whitney and Clayton (2010) in that they solicit open and frank assessments of the university-host relationships and interactions. The semi-structured interviews helped us assess the extent to which students' labor and other contributions are positively experienced on the receiving end. Interviews with members of the host communities were undertaken alongside course activities to capture immediate responses to the interactions. This generated rich, open-ended conversations regarding expectations, emotions, and results that bring host community voices to the research, voices that are seldom heard. This method follows the advice of Wearing and his colleagues (2005, p.433) when they suggest that:

To provide equity across cultural differences effectively...there is a need to include research approaches that allow for the inclusion of the 'other', i.e., the host community's view, not as a component of the study but as a fundamental part of the development of the approach. The movement to examine ways of including different people in research, such as indigenous communities and their perspectives on the natural environment, can only add to an evolution of ideas.

The third qualitative method was to administer a questionnaire to students after they returned to the US. The questionnaire was designed to illicit responses that would allow comparisons of several aspects of experiential learning. These include pre-departure preparation, the nature of on-site reflections, faculty-community relationships, service action and objectives, and post-experience reactions, perceptions, and impacts. Designed to encourage reflection and a personal assessment of programmatic impacts, the questionnaire sought to understand whether students' expectations were met and if students felt that the experiential learning component was valuable for themselves and their hosts. Four South Africa and eight Dominica students completed questionnaires.

The fourth and final method involved analyzing written reflections by students that were available in electronic form. Students from the South Africa course that convened in 2008 and 2009 described their experience in considerable detail in an online blog and in journal entries. Student writings from several years of the Dominica course were similarly available electronically. In this paper, all quotes from both hosts and students are treated confidentially, in accordance with the rules of the university institutional review board. Together these four qualitative methods complement each other, and allowed for a triangulation of information helping to understand ways in which students and host communities benefit from the study abroad courses.

Results

Impacts on Students

In this section, we describe how students were affected by their experiences in the two

courses. We do this by drawing from a close reading of their written words in their questionnaire responses and post-trip reflections. We looked for patterns in the written materials, i.e., student views that seem to capture more widely held attitudes toward the study abroad experience. The first author's participant observation in the two courses allowed her to contextualize and understand more fully the student commentaries. Detailed notes taken throughout the participant observation also help to highlight salient themes in the students' writings.

Three themes emerged from the writings of students in both courses. First, many students valued how study abroad allowed them to connect abstract concepts with real-world people and situations. Second, students appreciated opportunities to reflect on their study abroad experiences (even when very tired after a long day), and suggested that study abroad substantially broaden their worldview. Third, students suggested that study abroad has had impacts on them that will continue as they make lifestyle choices into the future. The next three subsections elaborate on these points and illustrate them with quotations from students.

Integration of Concepts and Experience

Our findings suggest that students in both courses experienced profound growth in their understanding of course topics at both the academic and personal levels. Evaluated in terms of the three integrated components of experiential learning, namely conceptualization, first-hand engagement, and reflection (Bringle et al., 2007), both courses yielded substantial student benefits. The two courses created many opportunities for students to interact with local people, and successfully applied course concepts to first-hand interactive engagement. To illustrate, one student in the Dominica course described connections between course concepts and experiential learning as follows:

We interacted with individuals [related to all] of these concepts (food, environmental changes, and global solidarity). We had a face and story to put on what these hypothetical theories mean, and...it molded ideas in my head into something more applicable to my life...

Further, both courses drew on local leaders for cultural perspectives and insights into socio-economic challenges. Both groups of students worked in communities and applied course concepts, compared and contrasted lifestyles and experiences with cultural groups in the US, and examined the host country and local communities from multi-disciplinary perspectives. Another Dominica student eloquently and profoundly connected the course's civic engagement activities to concepts of community development and self-sufficiency:

Being able to be involved with the varying activities – be it assisting in fair-trade banana packaging, potting flowers, or partying with the community in the local fête – instilled within my mind a deeper understanding of just how fundamental these grassroots movements really are. ... they are creating positive energy in the lives of families and communities for the betterment of the island. I think my participation made development more accessible – not a lofty ideal, but something that involves a little dirt under the nails, and a few good people.

Reflection

Our broader experience with study abroad courses in a variety of contexts suggests

that reflection, undertaken throughout the learning process, is a component of experiential learning particularly deserving of instructor effort and analytical scrutiny. Despite the importance of reflection, there is surprisingly little assessment of reflection's impacts on students in the FLSTSA literature (Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Paige et al., 2009). This section of the paper therefore reviews various manifestations of reflection in these two courses.

We can immediately note one difference between the courses that is relevant to reflection, and that is associated with faculty-student ratios. In the Dominica course, it is 2:15, allowing students continual contact with faculty who share their daily experiences. In the South Africa course, the faculty-student ratio ranges from 1:17 to 1:26, a significant difference which raises the question of how large the student population can be and still ensure ample opportunities for reflective interactions during study abroad.

Comparing and contrasting the student reactions helps to gauge what they have gained through the combination of formal instruction and experiential learning. Reflection should include a range of activities that are mutually reinforcing, appeal to different types of students, and tap different student skill sets. Examples include regular journal writing, group discussions (among course participants and with locals in country), fund-raising projects to support the host communities, individual research projects that include interviewing and other empirical data gathering, post-trip assignments and other extensions of the learning experience. This leads to another difference between the courses related to pre-trip preparations, because effective reflection should begin prior to travel. The South Africa course takes place over nearly four weeks in country, but without pre-trip class meetings. Reading preparations are optional, but this student's post-trip comments suggest their importance:

Honestly, I didn't come into this trip knowing much about the history of South Africa ... As far as the class-time portion goes, I'd recommend doing some of the readings and taking notes on them before you leave.

Another South Africa student expressed similar sentiments:

I have learned so incredibly much about a culture that I really knew very little about before arriving.

Clearly any travel and study experience is enhanced by substantial advanced preparations. However, many FLSTSA courses travel during the summer when students are otherwise not on campus, and therefore devote inadequate time to on-campus, pre-trip reading, discussion, and reflection.

In contrast, the Dominica study abroad experience takes place during the academic year, during either winter or spring break. It is therefore easier to complement the study abroad portion with considerable on-campus class time devoted to pre- and post-trip reflection. Pre-departure preparations include written reflections on and discussion of readings, pre-trip Skyping with Dominican environmentalists and other community leaders, and work on developing individual research projects during many hours of pre-trip class meetings. Preparations also included packing dos and don'ts so students travel parsimoniously and simply, as appropriate to the cultural context. Dominica students therefore have not had the regrets suggested by this South Africa student's post-travel advice:

Don't blow up your blow-dryer/straightener on the first day.

One Dominica student summarized the pre-travel preparations this way:

They help to form a complete and multi-faceted context for the trip beyond surface issues.

In short, pre-trip activities including reflections prepare students to make the most out of their limited number of days in the Global South.

Beyond these pre-trip differences, there is substantial evidence that both courses encourage substantial and deep reflection, both at the individual and group levels, during and after the study abroad experience. The journal writing during and after the international component in both courses allows additional time for placing the experience in perspective and applying new knowledge to challenges at home. Quotes from students suggest they engaged in considerable personal reflection on their study abroad experience. For example, responses reflect an understanding that their service work was more beneficial to them than to the community groups they helped. Several students had the maturity and self-reflectivity to acknowledge that they had little to offer toward community development efforts other than brief companionship, moral support, or reinforcing the idea that some visitors care (Figure 1). A post-South Africa reflection included the following observation:

Yes, the project site needs volunteers and the director especially needs support and assistance. But I think that these needs would be best served by people from a nearby community that shared cultural and linguistic knowledge. The local youth can use volunteering as a way to build job skills and experience.

Regarding her intentions to return one day to South Africa, the student added,

They only need international volunteers as a way to make long-lasting relationships with those who will donate time and money in the future.

A student returning from Dominica was similarly self-reflective and deferent when she proclaimed that she and her fellow students were likely “only in the way” of local people when assisting them in their daily work:

They probably could have finished faster if we weren't there.

These student comments show, not only a level of humility regarding what US students have to offer local people, but also indicate that students have reflected on their own roles and how best to stay involved. Both sets of students realized that the communities had the resources they needed to accomplish their own goals, representing a level of respect and admiration for the people they visited. This is a far cry from the common assumption that youth volunteers from the Global North have all the answers. This South Africa student displays some sophisticated reflection on study abroad:

By simply coming to this country and bearing witness to its history, its present struggles and accomplishments, we are showing that we are part of their plight. As a world community, their struggles are our own. Working together, perhaps we can make a difference in their lives as well as our own.



Figure 1. South Africa: Affection and play with toys donated by US students (source: South Africa course website).

Longer-Term Impacts on Students

Longer-term transformational impacts on students after they return from study abroad is of particular interest to us, although our observations are short-term and therefore tentative. Bringle and Steinburg (2010) note that effective study abroad inspires students to take further action after the experience, an idea we return to in the conclusion. Other related research suggests that many students who participate in short-term “alternative break” programs to underprivileged communities then commit themselves to long-term community service (Bowen, 2011). Study abroad extensions, in which students commit to further community engagement after study abroad, take experiential learning to a higher level, or to what has been called “civic education” (Bringle et al., 2007; Bringle and Steinburg, 2010). To this end, questionnaires administered to students for this project asked them to extrapolate as to whether their experience in a developing country will lead to significant changes in perspective and behavior back home. Students in both courses indicated they intend to continue to apply lessons learned abroad, as this South Africa student suggests:

I have already signed up to volunteer this semester at a local hospital. I have also convinced a friend to go work with cheetahs in South Africa because I know it will change her life as much as this experience changed mine.

A Dominica student similarly suggests the trip delivered broader insights into key societal issues:

I have a new appreciation for sustainability, conservation, and the importance of community.

Comments such as these from returning students reveal learning outcomes with the po-

tential to lead to concrete civic engagement action. This student describes how the South Africa experience was transformational:

(It was) a life changing experience for me that I will always remember. In the end, what I want to do is take my volunteering experiences back with me to the United States and implement them in our own society.

A fellow student had similar sentiments:

The life-changing experience does not end when we return home. Returning home should be an opportunity to share the enthusiasm and inspiration of our experience and be a voice for greater social involvement. By sharing our international volunteer experience with those in our home community and finding ways to incorporate what we learned into our daily lives, we play an important role in fostering cultural understanding between people.

One Dominica student was able to apply the course's social responsibility lessons to daily routines back home:

I walk everywhere now. I can't believe I used to take my car for less than a mile trip.

Another student made connections between study abroad, life back home, and global issues:

I am inspired to treat my surrounding environment with more care, because our actions in the US do have an impact on the rest of the world, including the small island of Dominica.

This Dominica student demonstrates profound humility and introspection regarding how to make a difference in the world through grassroots engagement:

I feel that I have always strived to maintain an educational mindset in all of my international interactions, to approach these interactions with humility rather than as a western elitist. However, through this [study abroad] experience, I have learned that although I have an enormous amount of energy I want to utilize to help peoples in need, the best thing I can do is to join efforts that are already in existence, community-based efforts, of the people for the people. Trying to help from the outside, I am learning, is just another form of elitism. Although this lesson came with difficulty, I am glad to have learned it – especially from so gracious a people.

One South Africa student summarized the experience in a way that would make most instructors proud:

This class is a lot of reading, writing, fieldwork, and participation; the more you put into it, the more you walk away with.

Study abroad to less touristy and less well-trodden places in the Global South, where students experience daily challenges and new cultural perspectives, can be profoundly transformative, as this student suggests:

I think it is so important for students and people in general to go out of their element to countries they normally wouldn't visit. I think South Africa was that for me... it was one of the best experiences of my life.

A Dominica student expressed similar sentiments:

I chose to go to Dominica over spring break because I wanted to do an alternative program. I didn't want to have the traditional spring break experience. I wanted to have an opportunity to study, to go see a different place that I typically would not have an opportunity to go to. ... It forced open a new dimension in my mind. It forced open a new perspective on the world. ... I am always going to have a part of Dominica with me because it is such a unique and rare experience.

To summarize this section on student impacts, despite the topical and contextual differences between the South Africa and Dominica courses, reactions from the returning students reveal significant emotional and intellectual impacts from their experiential learning activities. Both courses offered many opportunities for on-site analysis and comparisons to realities at home, related to key issues such as the functioning of communities, daily challenges, food availability, transportation, education, disease, and civic responsibility. Students in the South Africa course noted that they would have benefitted from required pre-trip readings and reflection opportunities, while Dominica students appreciated the prior knowledge they brought to their study abroad locale. Students in both courses suggested that their study abroad experiences may have longer-term impacts on their global perspectives, lifestyle choices, and interest in volunteering. We now turn to the question of the extent to which the two courses provide equitable benefits to the host communities.

Impacts on Host Communities

This section reports on the results of interviews with host community members that were designed to assess the extent to which their community benefits from the experiential learning activities. As in the previous section on student impacts, the first author's participant observation in the two courses allowed her to contextualize and understand more fully statements by host community members. The section is organized under five themes that capture various dimensions of engaged learning in a different cultural context. These five themes emerged from a close reading of the transcribed interviews coupled with detailed notes taken during participant observation of the student – host interactions. As you will see, the impacts of the South Africa and Dominica courses are less similar for the host communities than they were for students.

Shared Labor and Meals

Activities that contribute to crossing cultural boundaries include laboring together and sharing meals. One set of observations associated with work and meals serves to differentiate the courses regarding approaches and outcomes. In South Africa, students arrived at the community work site in the late morning and volunteered by watering gardens and transplanting flowers with community gardeners for approximately two hours before being called to lunch (Figure 2). Students were surrounded by children helpers who carried tools and sought playtime and attention. The students had paid for the food in advance through the coordinating travel agent. The local project director prepared the food in her own kitchen. When the students were called to eat, they were directed to a small dining area created for the occasion and arranged buffet style with white cloth table linens and metal utensils. In contrast, local people walked uphill to the open air cookhouse and took their lunch on scattered benches and crates. This abrupt segregation by space and in terms

of quality between the people who had spent the morning sharing work harkened back to the days of Apartheid, when different races didn't eat or interact with one another in social situations. When asked how they felt about the separate meals, one community member expressed dismay:

They are only here for half a day. Why are they talking to each other?

Another similarly remarked:

Maybe they thought that if we ate with them, there wouldn't be enough to go around.

Thus an opportunity extending from the shared labor to enjoy relaxed personal interactions and a more equitable and positive experience for the community, and we would argue for the students, was missed. This example illustrates how a seemingly small logistical oversight can significantly dampen the cross-cultural experience.



Figure 2. Students in South Africa volunteer by watering gardens and transplanting flowers with community gardeners (source: the authors).

In contrast, students in Dominica spent a morning working side-by-side with women at a community-based gardening project. The day prior, faculty had instructed students to shop for local food and vegetables during free time in the capital city, to store them overnight, and to carry them to the project site. When lunchtime came, students prepared a feast of in-season Dominican fruits and vegetables, cheeses, smoked meat, and breads to share with the co-op women. The importance of food to the local culture and the pride of people in seeing the students prepare and enjoy the shared meal are indicative of experiential learning that enhances relationships and contributes to reciprocity and friendship. On-site interviews with Dominicans revealed a positive response from community members, as

this quote illustrates:

It's more like you are our friends coming to help for the day. We can talk easily with you and also show you the things we know.

Another Dominican remarked:

The best part is that you prepared lunch! Sharing our food is important to us, and it is like you already learned what it is that we like.

This eating arrangement example illustrates how study abroad can work to counter deeply-rooted colonial and cultural structures. In so doing, equity and reciprocity can be advanced. We want to be clear that it is not easy to overcome the default for FLSTSA whereby visitors and hosts eat separately. In Dominica, as in many host communities, hosts believe it proper for guests to eat first and separately. However, due to the instructors' long-term efforts toward reciprocity, their hands-on involvement with trip logistics, and their on-going reflection on the annual trips, the sharing of labor extended into the sharing of food. Students in the Dominica course had been prepared in advance both to engage in this level of service to their hosts and for intimate social interactions. As a result, both students and their hosts had a more equitable cross-cultural experience.

Accommodations

Lodging for the South Africa course was arranged through guest houses and hostels. Logistics for the tour were handled by a local travel agent that organized the transport, meals, and lodging on behalf of the university. Many post-secondary FLSTSA courses rely on guesthouses and similar types of more impersonal accommodation, presumably because of the ease of booking and the comfort of Western-modeled hotel rooms. With greater similarity to tourism than to traditional study abroad, staying in hotels accrues financial benefits to larger urban-based proprietors rather than to rural communities where economic opportunities are fewer. Students' experiences more closely parallel those of conventional tourists, paying for room and board and spending evenings interacting amongst themselves in internet cafes and restaurants in urban areas removed from the sites of community service activities.

The Dominica course has a focus on small-scale sustainable ecotourism, and therefore most of the accommodation and many of the meals take place at three ecolodges, each with its own emphasis and character. This extends experiential learning to include meal time, night time, and indeed practically any hour of the day. Students interact with locals who manage and work at the ecolodges, in order to understand their strategies and challenges. More broadly, the Dominica course seeks to spread the benefits widely among small-scale business owners in the host communities. Note the following observations from an owner-operator bus driver employed to transport the student group; he is reflecting on a day in which Dominica course participants spent in a fishing village:

Yes, we should have more student groups like yours and not so many other tourists. Why? Because the money goes further and deeper. If I had a group like yours for 10 days every month, I would be laughing! You have had a good day, and the kiosk lady, she has money tonight to buy for her children. The fisherman has money to buy chicken, so the farmer he buys from has money for school fees. You [the class] help a lot and don't make demands that things be a certain way.

But for both students and host communities involved with the Dominica course, one of the most direct contributions to deeper inter-cultural understanding is a multiple night home-stay experience with families in a village. For decades, international educators have utilized the home-stay in recognition that family life is the most intimate and profound path towards understanding such cultural differences as gender relationships, social structures, livelihoods, and education systems in host countries. Dominica students are divided into groups of 2-4, and experience daily life as a local family does. Participants share the dinner table and cultural traditions with families, and experience the daily routine of child, garden, and animal care. Host families are financially compensated, which provided much-needed cash. Families also expressed pleasure in cooking traditional food and giving tours of their farms and communities. In fact, the only negative feedback from hosts in the interviews regarding the home-stays was the fact that they were too short! One host-mother said:

My only wish is that we had more time together. I can see things that Americans don't know about gardening. There is a lot more that we could learn from each other.

Both students and families recommended that in coming years, students be given time to spend an additional full day with host families working on farms, harvesting food, and preparing a meal together to be shared in the evening. Integrating these suggestions into a future trip further reinforces concepts such as sustainability, local food, reciprocity, and cultural engagement and exchange. It also illustrates the many ways whereby on-going faculty relationships and dialogue with the host community leads to continuous program improvement. As the bus filled with students was departing from the village, a man who had hosted students expressed his pleasure:

It was good to have the students come and live with us...you are welcome! I hope you make Dominica your choice to live.

Engaging Communities

Observations and comparisons of service and engagement activities in the two countries suggest ways that the host communities can be more involved in their organization prior to the students' arrival. In South Africa, there was virtually no direct communication between hosts and program administrators (i.e., both the tour guide and faculty member) prior to the interaction. Two days of planned service and engagement at an orphanage in South Africa were rather loosely constructed. The first author was staying at the project site prior to the students' arrival and took part in meetings whereby community members brainstormed activities for students that could "keep them busy" in small segments of volunteer time. Interviews with members of the host community suggested that they were not asked whether or not they wanted to host the volunteers, and many did not know in advance that the students were coming:

We see them arrive and we don't know why they are here.

Another community member in South Africa expanded on this idea:

Before they come, they must know what to expect. If we could have told them in advance, that when they arrive here they will be doing this and this... Now we only have groups of two or three and we have to figure out what to do with them. We can assign them, but we don't know what their skills are.

Yet another South African's reactions suggest a lack of discussion of aims and objectives prior to the students' arrival:

It is a long way to come here to work with us. Don't you have poor people in America? Why doesn't somebody help them?

The contrast between student and community expectations and experiences in the South Africa course reveals the disconnect that can result from limited communication or pre-activity preparation. This led to the experiential learning and social interaction on the ground having limited positive impact on the host community.

In contrast, the longer-term relationship and the hands-on nature of the faculty-community interactions in the Dominica course result in deeper engagement and corresponding gains for the community. The Dominica course integrates learning objectives and engagement into the common daily activities of local people. For example, in relation to course readings that describe the plight of banana farmers and the efforts to market Fair Trade produce, students toiled for a half day alongside workers at a small family-owned farm. They harvested bananas, carried loads of green fruit down mountain-slopes, and saw the boxes they've packed to exacting standards leave by truck to the port. This created opportunities for conversations initiated from both sides regarding sustainable agriculture, the global market for bananas, and challenges to small farmers (Figure 3). To further illustrate themes of livelihoods and environmental sustainability, Dominica students on another day accompanied local fisherman in their boats, line-fishing along with them as they do every day. Students experienced the vagaries of fish supplies and shared personal stories with their hosts.



Figure 3. Students and farmers pack Dominican fair trade bananas for export (source: the authors).

Interviews with Dominicans revealed some tangible and immediate benefits to the host community. The Dominica course activities demonstrate to Dominicans that what to them are mundane and perhaps even unattractive or backward ways-of-life, are indeed engaging and compelling to visitors. For example, one fisherman appreciated that outsiders showed interest in his work and that he could share his knowledge and way-of-life while earning income during the half-day tour:

We didn't know about this before – that people would want to come and be fishing with us. We would like to do it every day.

Another Dominican commented:

More study groups should come so that we can really engage with each other.

Interviews with Dominica community members on their perceptions of the students revealed pleasure in the opportunity to “share how we live,” and to have more meaningful interactions with guests than they would otherwise have with those on a tour. One community leader in Dominica who had never seen this kind of tourism concluded,

Well, if you are learning well and coming back every year, then this is the kind of tourism we want.

These comments are results of relationships established between the university representatives and community partners over five years and at least fifteen combined visits to the country. They illustrate both the tremendous effort required, and the rewards that are possible, from study abroad devoted to community engagement, reciprocity and equity.

Reciprocity in Cultural Performances

The two courses also differed with respect to engagement and reciprocity during cultural performances, and this also is related to the amount of pre-trip planning and preparation. At the orphanage visited by the South Africa FLSTSA program, local young people make regular visits and are actively engaged in peer education which includes singing, drama, and poetry clubs. When acting as hosts to visitors such as the students, there is often an afternoon performance of traditional dance and brief educational skits, usually related to self-respect and HIV/AIDS prevention. On the first day of volunteering, the students were ushered into the performance space and watched a one-hour show, which they video-taped and passively observed. The high-spirited local youth sang enthusiastically and invited the students to engage the music by clapping or dancing. However, the students seemed too self-conscious to participate and the show eventually ended awkwardly. This lack of direct engagement with the dancers brought reprimands from the faculty member later that evening, who admonished them for being insulting to the performers by not reciprocating or joining the dancing and singing. The more painful consequence, however, was relayed during follow-up interviews by the first author after the students had left. When asked how she felt about being video-taped, the young performer stated emphatically, “I hate Americans.” Her friend clarified: “We worked hard all day too. Why can't they perform for us?”

This is a particularly strong reaction, and is not likely the result of a single visit from a student group. Observation and analysis points rather to renewed disappointment accumulated over several years whereby these young women had experienced a one-sided sharing of culture that was not reciprocated. Unfortunately, the US students fell into the passive

trap of what Urry (1990) labels “the tourist gaze” that serves to reinforce the objectification and further alienation of people from one another. An opportunity was missed to reduce barriers through a shared and reciprocal celebration.

In Dominica, the faculty was able to anticipate similar culturally-sensitive situations and take a pro-active approach. Prior to travelling, song lyrics and practice time were built into the lesson plans so that students could sing with some confidence when in Dominica. During the study abroad experience, the opportunity arose on several occasions to partake in choral exchange, including at a school assembly and at a cultural fête in the village that was host to the home-stay (Figure 4). Rather than being passive consumers of cultural performance, the US students were able to offer a sample of folk songs popular back home. Faculty purposefully prepared for such intercultural sharing through music and performance with the aim of reciprocity and equity. Although some US students show some initial reluctance, having students and hosts sing for each other and with each other contributes to breaching cultural divides.

Material Support for Host Communities

This subsection describes the various ways in which participants in the FLSTSA courses raised money or secured in-kind contributions prior to travel in an effort to contribute materially to the host communities. These efforts are admirable in themselves, but they play out differently in the host community contexts depending on the extent to which the FLSTSA courses are built upon personal relationships of trust and partnership.

In South Africa, two of the students had enrolled in the course two years in a row. Prior to traveling for the second year, in 2009, they raised money at an event at a local restaurant. At the end of their visit to the orphanage, the students proudly delivered a check to the director of the South African project. The students were embarrassed by her gratitude and explained the ease with which the money was raised. The students planned and executed the fund-raising activity independently of the faculty instructor, and it was undoubtedly a gracious and selfless initiative. However, the faculty leader could have used her knowledge of the local context, or drawn upon insights from others working in the area, to investigate how the money would be spent or ask what the community needed. As the first author was aware after spending time in the community, questions had been raised about the director’s transparency in this regard, and an enormous house was being built on the site for her and her husband. The money earned by fund-raising and handed to the director might have achieved more sustainable community benefits if it had been integrated into the agenda of local organizers through longer-term engagement by the faculty leader.

In the Dominica course, contributions made to local youth are the result of long-term relationships, communication and follow-up between faculty and their Dominican partners. The nature of these contributions varies from year to year depending on local needs. For the study abroad trip analyzed here, the Dominican partners included two village schools, an eco-lodge and a Peace Corps volunteer. Students in the Dominica class obtained book contributions from various sources back home and then delivered on-site nearly 800 children’s books to two primary schools. Books were packed into luggage to avoid shipping costs, as students had been advised in pre-travel meetings to travel light and save the space for books and other school supplies. Donations of this sort can be repeated in other international trips from the Global North to the Global South. The day’s experience at one of the schools, reading the newly-delivered books, sharing songs, and playing sports with the

children, was especially rewarding due to the knowledge that the gifts were in the hands of those most in need as defined by local partners.

A primary school administrator described the long-term partnership with schools and their villages as follows:

First of all it is a mutual relationship – it is good because we exchange ideas, we learn from each other a lot; students get to explore the culture. We appreciate that you go back and raise those monies [matching fund-raising campaigns]. At a friendship level and professional level, with us it has been very good. It is great how we communicate beforehand and agree, and things can happen swiftly.

Here the administrator is referring to an annual matching fund-raising campaign, and to the events designed together in advance, such as school assemblies, meals, and musical events. At a preschool, Dominica course participants annually present a modest check from fund-raising efforts that contribute to scholarships for needy preschool children. Instructors and the preschool principal decide in advance how much each side can realistically raise, and work to match each other (Figure 4). Both the preschool and the primary school thanked the US student group for the books and scholarship money by presenting them with gift baskets overflowing with mostly non-commodified local products including hot sauce, soap, coffee, sweets, bay oil, and ginger. It was an appropriate exchange given each group's relative wealth and resource base.



Figure 4. Students sing to Dominican primary school children; the poster in the background is a big check, the result of a matching fund-raising campaign between course participants and members of the host school community (source: the authors)

Evidence collected from community partners and beneficiaries indicates that FLSTSA programs can achieve greater equity and benefits to host communities through on-going communication and trust-building between returning faculty and their host partners. When faculty work with local partners to plan return visits, the university-community partnership is reinforced and extended. This allows faculty to integrate student learning into on-going community projects, and tailor course itineraries and learning objectives around real-life issues.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Short-Term Study Abroad

Reciprocity between universities and local community partners has long been touted as an essential component of successful service oriented study abroad programs. However,

few studies have tried to measure that reciprocity and ensure that it takes effect. The vast majority of prior research focuses on measuring the benefits for university students. Those few studies that have attempted to measure impacts on host communities often address it from a student perspective (e.g., Do you feel your service had an impact on the host community?). The present study has ventured into the realm of observing student-host interactions and incorporating voices from the partner organizations. Given the rising trends in both civic engagement in education and short-term study abroad programs toward achieving host community benefits, we believe this study is a useful step toward advancing the goal of equity. It should be of value to faculty members and their universities embarking on the development and implementation of short-term service oriented study abroad programs.

To achieve our goal of assessing program benefits, we examined and compared two service-oriented FLSTSA (faculty led short-term study abroad) courses in South Africa and Dominica. These courses were chosen because they are fairly representative of emerging trends in study abroad, in terms of the locales and the social science subject matter. Both courses emphasize experiential learning and engaging their host communities, themes associated with a growing emphasis in higher education concerned with global citizenship. In short, our analysis suggests that both courses deliver an impressive range of student benefits, but they are not as similar regarding their host community impacts. Let us briefly elaborate.

Both courses are transformative for many students. Both courses deploy experiential learning in the Global South to illustrate conceptual themes related to major social and economic challenges. Like many students who have found study abroad to be transformative, students in the two case study courses were embedded in communities in which they needed to adapt to and learn from a new and unfamiliar culture, even if for only short periods (Kiely, 2010). Students also gain deeper, more nuanced and first-hand understandings of concepts such as the uneven distribution of wealth, the difficulties of economic development, and the local survival strategies (Kiely, 2005). The courses demonstrated how community engagement coupled with regular personal and group reflection reinforce and catalyze student learning. Further, the better prepared students are prior to travelling, the greater the impact of short-term study abroad. This may seem obvious, but many study abroad courses, as illustrated by the South Africa course examined here, do not engage students in in-depth reading, discussion, and telecommunication-based interaction with community leaders to prepare them for the foreign experience. Students should not enter the foreign country naïve as to its historical, geographical, and cultural contexts.

The research suggests there are many benefits from carefully incorporating host community needs and perspectives into the FLSTSA course. However, engaging host community members in the development and ongoing revisions of a study abroad course represents a great challenge to many faculty, who normally focus on enhancing student learning outcomes (Sandman et al., 2010). As challenging as deep university-community collaboration can be, we contend that designing study abroad courses based on reciprocity and social responsibility can enhance both the benefits to host communities and the educational impacts on students. In other words, reciprocity and equity are best taught by example, and significant additional student learning results from bearing witness to host communities that are engaged as mutual partners. We follow Kahn (2010) when she argues that international programs should involve what are inevitably diverse perspectives of various host

community members at early stages of development, instead of simply aiming to generate host community benefits at the end. The goal of providing help to needy people through service learning should no longer be seen as adequate.

This comparative study suggests that attitudes and perceptions within the host communities toward FLSTSA visitors are directly related to the length and depth of the relationships between local actors and the program designers. Further, as Kiely (2008) has argued, study abroad courses are unlikely to achieve bigger and longer term impacts on their host communities if they stand alone. Instead, study abroad courses need to draw from and incorporate a wide range of skills and resources from the university community. When study abroad courses integrate contributions and buy-ins from their universities' diverse assets, such as from ecologists, economists, medical professionals, service learning specialists, and administrators, longer term and more significant host community impacts can be realized (Lewin, 2009).

The Dominica course examined here has accrued more benefits to individuals, community-based organizations, and small business owners in the host communities. The trust built between faculty and community partners over time contributed to the honest articulation of local needs, and allowed for an appropriate exchange of volunteer labor and other forms of mutually-beneficial social engagement and learning. The Dominica instructors' knowledge of and long-term commitment to the local context created additional opportunities for student interaction with community members, access to appropriate authorities, and structured, integrated experiential learning.

As one of our final points on the potential impacts of short-term study abroad, we'd like to draw greater attention to the distinction between direct, immediate benefits and more indirect and longer-term forms of gain. The short time horizon associated with the present data collection means that the paper has focused on direct, immediate benefits. For students enrolled in FLSTSA courses like those examined in this paper, there will often be transformative impacts from the exposure to global social realities and inequities that are well beyond their daily purview (cf Kiely 2005; 2008). Short-term host community impacts will not usually be as obvious. It is not easy for a small group of students to have a sizeable, direct impact on a host community within the confines of a study abroad course. However, there may be host community benefits from many groups of student visitors that are more indirect, and can be manifested over repeated visits and longer periods of time. Future research should attempt to measure the benefits for host communities by using a wider lens than the interviews of individual participants in this study. Such research could reveal larger patterns of gain resulting from sustained, open, honest, and equitable partnerships between the university and host community organizations.

Similarly, student gains over the longer term are difficult to measure but can be very significant. For instance, a group of students studying environmental science or international business who partner with teachers and children in a primary school in a remote village might have a modest measurable direct impact on that community. However, the long-term benefits of having a group of future environmental and business professionals partake in such community engagement could yield an indirect benefit to a wider, more global community (Paige et al. 2009; Bringle & Steinburg 2010). Such benefits are clearly more difficult to measure but suggest some of the longer-term promise of FLSTSA.

While it is not our intent to impose a particular ethical sensibility onto FLSTSA practitioners regarding how to run programs, we do wish to argue that devoting greater attention

to the perspectives within and impacts on the host communities is a necessary step in the right direction. Additional preparations and collaborations prior to a trip can generate substantially greater equity and reciprocity, and in turn, can also enhance student learning. We hold that the pursuit of greater equity and reciprocity in study abroad should be an important objective as we seek to internationalize campuses, foster global and community citizenship, and engage the world. As a leading Dominican environmental activist described the community engagement he witnessed in the FLSTSA course: "I have no doubt this is the wave of the future."

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