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*Service learning can have a profound impact on students. This article is written from the perspective of an international service learning student at St. Mary's College of Maryland. The author explains the effects of service learning on her life and draws some broader conclusions about its impact on students in general. She highlights the learning value of experience in new environments, the power of reflection, and describes how understanding and intellectual growth are enhanced.*

## **Guatemala, The Gambia, and Graduation: A Student's Perspective**

It was a normal Thursday morning when I sat down at my desk to check my e-mail, where, mixed among my usual messages, was one titled "I volunteered you." I figured it meant that I would be serving on another committee or speaking to another civic group. But I was pleased to discover that the message was from Dr. William Roberts, one of my professors from St. Mary's College of Maryland, where I earned my BA in Anthropology and Sociology in 1996. Dr. Roberts had volunteered me to contribute to a project on service learning. He thought of me because I was fortunate to go on the first two study-tours he conducted—the first to Guatemala and the second to The Gambia, West Africa.

On my first study-tour in January 1996, I traveled in a group of ten students to the Peten region of Guatemala for two weeks. My second service learning experience came in May of the same year when I departed for a six-week study-tour in The Gambia, West Africa.

In 1997 it was time for me to become a responsible adult. I put it off for as long as possible and I spent the beginning of that year "finding myself"—a romantic euphemism for waiting tables and taking classes here and there. As the romance began to wear off, I reflected on what to do next, and remembering my international study-tour experience, I began researching work abroad. Less than a year after I returned from The Gambia, I boarded a plane for what would be my greatest adventure yet: I was going to spend a year teaching English in South Korea. Returning from Korea in the summer of 1998, I began a career in the independent sector working for educational nonprofit organizations. I currently

work for the Central Midlands School-to-Work Partnership in South Carolina.

As I began thinking about what to say in this article, I thought about my time in The Gambia and Guatemala. I reread papers that I had written, as well as several written by my service learning contemporaries. I quickly realized that I am not the same person as the one who wrote those papers and went on the two study-tours three years ago. At that time, I did not appreciate that my education was not going to end when I received my diploma from St. Mary's—graduation was only the beginning. I awoke to the realization that life-long learning is possible outside of the classroom. I was interested in education as a learner/student and as a teacher. The real gift that service learning gave me is the ability to view the world as my classroom, and thus my education continues.

### **Service Learning at St. Mary's College**

For this article, I use a very broad definition of service learning, which includes any activity that links community service with academic learning. The goals of the St. Mary's College Study Abroad Office include: deepening the understanding of other societies and cultures, and consequently of one's own; appreciation of diversity; encouragement of international friendships; leadership development; and the development of educational, career, and professional opportunities (Hopkins, 1996, p. 36).

The SMC study-tours, especially the study-tour to The Gambia, brought us in close contact with Peace Corps volunteers. The Gambia study-tour incorporated the mission and goals of the United States Peace Corps into the goals of the SMC study abroad program. First, we wanted to help the people of interested countries and areas to meet their need for trained workers. Second, we hoped to promote a better understanding of Americans among the people served. Third, we attempted to enhance our understanding of other people and cultures (<<http://www.peacecorps.gov/about/history/60s.html>> October 25, 1999).

I also had some personal goals for these study-tours. As an anthropology major I had spent hundreds of hours studying other cultures and I wanted some first hand experience. I was already a college graduate when I went to The Gambia; the six credits earned from this course did me little good. Yet, I felt I needed to go. Although I had met all the requirements to earn my bachelors degree, I felt that there was still something missing. I wasn't sure how to make the transition from student to professional and I did not know how to apply what I had learned in college. I needed to "road test" my degree. I also knew that my study-tour would give me some concrete experiences to list on my résumé and provide an interesting topic of conversation at interviews.

The study-tour model fulfilled my desire to test my education outside of the classroom, and it emphasized civic responsibility. School often seems abstract to students, and service learning responds to their desire to be in the world learning from practical experiences and having the opportunity to use their education to help others.

### ***Guatemala, Peten Study-Tour, January 1996***

During Christmas break of my senior year, I accompanied Dr. Roberts and a team of nine other students to Flores, an island in the Peten region of Guatemala. The purpose of

this course was to introduce students to Guatemala's Peten region by teaching them about its environment, natural history, society, and human history. There was required reading before the trip and a daylong orientation session at the college to provide us with some background knowledge.

We arrived on Flores on a glorious January day and settled in our "hotel," called Dona Rosa's. Dona Rosa's was actually a two-story house where Rosa's family of six lived in one room on the first floor. I thought about how much I resented having one roommate in the dorms and couldn't imagine having five. We were treated to Latin American hospitality at its finest and became like family the day we arrived. Dona Rosa soon became "Mama Rosa" and her home became our home. As we cooked, ate, and spoke with her, I gained a new appreciation for the saying, "mi casa es su casa."

The community service component of the trip required us to work with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help local villages develop and evaluate their eco-tourism facilities. The nights we did not spend with Mama Rosa were spent in the field, living in communities with fledgling eco-tourism projects. We spoke with local people about the facilities they had already constructed, discussing what was needed to attract American tourists and desperately needed tourist dollars into their village. I know that I made a difference and my contributions will have a lasting impact on the communities with which we worked.

This study-tour had a profound impact on my professional development. I was six months away from finishing college, and was beginning to view graduation with a sense of trepidation. I had always been a successful student, and knew where I fit in at school, but I did not have a clear idea of where I fit in the working world. In addition to the Petenero communities, this trip introduced me to the world of nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations. I saw people with whom I could relate who were doing jobs that I found interesting. I had found my niche.

### ***The Gambia, Study-Tour, Summer 1996***

When I returned from Guatemala and settled in for my final semester of college, I learned that there would be a study-tour in The Gambia, West Africa, the following summer. This study-tour was an intensive, six-week course, and its purpose, according to the syllabus, was "to increase participant's knowledge of Africa and life in African society" and "to develop an appreciation for the contributions of African civilizations and societies by study of primary African institutions in The Gambia." I immediately applied to participate. Over the next semester, we prepared for the trip by engaging in monthly discussion groups and seminars.

Two weeks after my graduation we flew to The Gambia. As we immersed ourselves in Gambian life, I found myself drawing on and pulling together everything I had learned in my college career. I was introduced to a tremendous amount of new information. We studied Mandinka and Wolof, two of the local languages. Prominent members of the community visited us and led discussion groups about culture and traditions. In addition, Dr. Roberts brought us into his extensive network of Gambians and American Peace Corps volunteers who served as mentors for our group. Through them we were constantly viewing and reviewing the basics of life in Gambian society.

The combination of simultaneously living and learning a new culture was extremely effective. It gave me a perspective on life that otherwise would have been impossible. For a brief time, I was able to step outside myself, and the preconceived notions that make up my social consciousness, to become part of this other world. This gave me the objectivity and relativity to comprehend many intricacies of Gambian culture that are lost on the tourist. It also gave me a new perspective on the influence my own culture and socialization had on me.

One requirement of this study-tour was to design and conduct a research project. In keeping with our goals, it had to be meaningful to my host population, incorporate my interest in education, and reflect my time in The Gambia. I chose to design and implement a survey research model of female education and literacy. It was a timely issue for The Gambia, which was in the process of rewriting their national education policy, and it incorporated my interest in education and touched on the issue of gender inequality, which became very apparent to me when I arrived in The Gambia.

The work was arduous and the working conditions demanding. The poverty was overwhelming and the heat was almost unbearable. I did not know true poverty until I stayed with a Gambian family. I saw the tremendous inequality in material wealth, healthcare, nutrition, and education between their culture and mine. Yet somehow, amid all this hardship, the Gambians were content. I envied their ability to make so much with so little. I learned how diverse the human population is and how every culture has something to contribute for the greater good of humanity.

Designing and conducting this project from start to finish gave me a sense of value and accomplishment that I had never felt before. I was not reading about research or assisting a professor—I was conducting it. I felt a tremendous increase in my self-esteem throughout this course because I had ownership over the project and the authority to make critical decisions. I began to appreciate how the skills I had learned in college could be applied outside the classroom. I left The Gambia with a tremendous sense of accomplishment, empowerment, and self-knowledge that has stayed with me to this day.

### ***Korea: Testing the Lessons of Service Learning***

The empowerment I experienced in The Gambia gave me the confidence to embark on my next adventure. In the summer of 1997, I boarded a plane for Seoul, South Korea. I was equipped with a passport, a one-year teaching contract, and the promise that someone would meet me at the airport. The 15 hours I spent on that plane were the longest of my life. I was traveling halfway around the world to a place I only really knew from watching reruns of *M\*A\*S\*H*. I did not know it at the time, but I was also equipped with tools that I had developed during my service learning: communication, understanding, and adaptability. When I arrived in Korea I realized that I was using a set of skills I did not know I had. Many times I heard people say, “you are truly Korean,” or, “you eat just like a Korean.” These are some of the highest compliments a foreigner living in Korea can be given. My fellow Americans often asked how I learned so much so quickly. I really could not explain. I had learned to adjust and assimilate without even being conscious of it. During my stay in Korea, I realized that

I did not have to be enrolled in a course to have a meaningful learning experience—the subway and corner grocery stores were my classroom. The ability to appreciate and celebrate the incredible differences between our cultures and learn from them was a gift from my international service learning experiences.

### Considering the Stakeholders

An important lesson for students is that service learning is not just learning for learning's sake, nor is it learning solely for the student's sake. The model followed by our study-tour group clearly outlines that the needs of the people of the host countries must be considered along with the students' needs. Ideally, the entire community should have a vested interest in the success of the project, which must have a clearly defined goal that considers the needs of the student, the community, the instructor, and the institution.

Students should expect a meaningful project that contributes to their academic goals. While expectations and objectives are diverse, there ought to be a common thread. The instructor and the institution can expect a more engaged student body and a stronger connection between the institution and the outside world. They may also hope to create a sense of civic responsibility among their students by teaching them how to use their education and skills for the good of the community. The community must identify a project that will improve its infrastructure and expect it to do so.

Students must be prepared to participate in projects that meet the needs of all interested parties. I would have loved to conduct research on the luxurious facilities available at four-star resort hotels in Guatemala; however, the success of the upscale tourist industry is not a concern to the average Guatemalan. People in small villages were not benefitting from any of the revenue generated by the lucrative tourist industry. Tourists stayed in big hotels, ate at fancy restaurants, and stared out at Guatemala through the windows of their double-decker luxury buses. Help, with ideas about how to lure tourists from the large corporate hotels and luxury buses to the villages that had established eco-tour cooperatives, was needed. To this end, I spent my nights as an eco-tourist, slung in a small hammock covered by mosquito netting, scribbling in a journal by flashlight.

Students must also be prepared to be ambassadors for their nation, their religion, their gender, and their age group. There were times in The Gambia and Korea when I realized that I might be the only American someone will ever know. Thus, it was possible that people would form their opinion of American college students, or American women, or Americans in general, based on my behavior. It was an awesome responsibility.

Once a student and instructor have designed a project that addresses the needs of all stakeholders, they must be prepared to finish it in a timely and professional manner. After all, there is much more than a grade on the line: the community you are serving is depending on you to fill the need your project identified. Because so many people are affected by a service learning project, students must ask themselves several questions before beginning a service learning project: Why am I doing this, and what do I expect to get out of it? How does this contribute to my academic/professional goals? How does this contribute to my personal goals? Am I ready to represent my school, gender, or nationality in a professional manner?

## **The Power of Reflection**

Reflection is an important part of service learning. It gave me, as a student, time to process, articulate, and cement my study-tour experiences. At the completion of The Gambia study-tour, members of the group wrote articles about their projects, and these were compiled into a book that was shared with the college community and the members of The Gambian community with whom we worked. In addition to the book, our group created multimedia presentations to share with our college community. When Dr. Roberts took our group to a meeting of the Washington Association of Professional Anthropologists to discuss our articles and research projects, I had an opportunity to present for the first time in a professional setting. At this meeting, a professor from Georgetown University asked me to come and present to her anthropology classes. I was honored and surprised—who was I to speak to a group of students? I came to understand that, as an international service learning student, I had an experience that very few people ever will have and sharing my experiences is a privilege and a responsibility.

## **Conclusions**

My adult life began sometime between Guatemala, The Gambia, and graduation. Graduation from college is an important and often difficult transition for many young people. Suddenly you are expected to act like a responsible adult. I don't remember being warned of that in any textbook or classroom. Service learning gave me the tools I needed to make this transition. Through these experiences I was able to learn much about who I was and who I wanted to become.

The career path I chose is, in large part, due to my international study-tour experiences. The Guatemala study-tour uncovered the world of employment in the independent sector. I saw how I could become a successful and productive professional. As a career coordinator working under the federal school-to-work grant, I now develop and support activities that connect the classroom with the real world. I assist students in their transition from school into the working world. I try to teach them the same lessons that I learned during my study-tours. Thus, my service learning experiences have come full circle.

I am not the only St. Mary's student on whom international service learning has had a great impact. Here are some observations of students who have participated in the St. Mary's study-tour program:

For the first time as an undergraduate, I felt like a real scientist and that the work I was doing really meant something. I knew that my research would not be just graded and tossed away. People actually took my work and research seriously (Brager, 1996).

One of the most important lessons I learned on this trip is that knowing something and understanding it can be two vastly different undertakings, the one dictated by fact and the other dictated by experience (Brown, 1996).

West Africa was an experience that I will never forget. New faces, new stories, new landscapes, new people, new friends... all of which

are separated only by an ocean, and reachable through people and stories, just a bit of what makes up a culture (Sigelman, 1999).

I am very fortunate to have had the experience I had in The Gambia. Not only was I able to learn quite a bit about Gambian culture and way of life, I also learned a great deal about myself (Williams, 1996).

When students are able to expand their focus beyond themselves, to see how they connect with real world communities, intellectual growth is promoted. When students are given the opportunity to work with diverse populations, community understanding and tolerance grow. By engaging students in participatory projects, service learning extends the classroom into the community and brings the community into the classroom. Service learning has such a profound impact on students because it gives them what they are looking for: a sense of connection and belonging to the greater community.

### ***Suggested Readings***

- Brager, Jen, "Working With Wildlife: Managing the Remains of a Once Vast Fauna," *Tubabs Under the Baobab* (St. Mary's City, MD: St. Mary's College Study Abroad Office, 1996): 1-10.
- Brown, Jane Adams, "Gender Divison in The Gambia," *Tubabs Under the Baobab* (St. Mary's City, MD: St. Mary's College Study Abroad Office, 1996): 71-76.
- Hopkins, J. Roy, "Studying Abroad as a Form of Experiential Education," *Liberal Education* (Summer, 1996): 36-41.
- Sigelman, Michael Scott, "Environmental Awareness and Education in The Gambia," *Tubabs Two: From the Baobab to the Bantaba* (St. Mary's City, MD: St. Mary's College Study Abroad Office, 1999): 51-58.
- Williams, Jeannette, "Female Education in The Gambia," *Tubabs Under the Baobab* (St. Mary's City, MD: St. Mary's College Study Abroad Office, 1996): 53-61.

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