

Service-Learning, Sustainability, and the Need for Cosmopolitan Experiences in
Undergraduate Education: A View from Anthropology

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Abstract

To become citizens of the world, students must understand with their heads, hands, and hearts the complex realities that people live within in a globalizing but nonetheless richly diverse world. A short-term study-abroad program, while brief in duration, may profoundly affect student learning and, indeed, transform life paths by providing students real experiences of cosmopolitan consciousness. The program described below and represented by the accompanying videos focuses on immersive, service-based learning in Costa Rica for the purpose of exploring sustainability in its multiple registers—social, environmental, and economic. Student reflection and commentary from our Costa Rican host institution confirm that programs such as this contribute critical insight toward the formation of globally competent citizens.

Keywords: study abroad, student learning, sustainability, service-learning

Introduction: Of Heads, Hands, Hearts and Fishing

On one of our few afternoons free of service work in the community of El Silencio, Costa Rica, several of my students and I opted to catch a van to a nearby surfing beach. The evening before, the students sat around a table in the eco-tourist lodge that serves as a de facto community center and discussed their plans. One student informed the others that she would not be joining us on the trip, despite the fact that she loves the ocean and would enjoy swimming and surfing.

“Why aren’t you coming?” her friends asked.

“I’m going to learn from my family how to catch and clean and cook a fish!” Lauren announced happily. And she did what she said—caught a fish and learned how to clean and cook it—but she also experienced a powerful moment of learning and connecting with the host family that had generously welcomed her into their sphere of care and knowing.

Later we learned that she and her host family spent the day using a picnic table and benches that we had built near the river a few days earlier as part of the community’s requested projects. Lauren directly observed and communicated the happiness that our work had brought to community members as they enjoyed a place that, before our work, had been an overgrown riverbank without amenities. In our class discussion that evening, the students reflected on how we in the United States can rely on government units to provide services such as parks and picnic tables, while this community depended on its own labor or the labor of visiting students for such amenities. During that afternoon by the river, and through Lauren’s story sharing with us, we experienced the kind of engaged understanding that an international service-learning course can make possible. As anthropologists, we experienced a wonderful moment of “making the familiar strange.”

Service-learning as a focus for undergraduate education sometimes meets its promise as an innovative pedagogical tool and sometimes falters “due to a lack of integration with the core mission and goals of higher education institutions” (Sternberger, Ford, & Hale, 2005, p. 77). Sustainability as an organizing principle similarly has yet to attain its full potential in undergraduate education, despite years of advocacy by Orr (1991, 1993, 1994) and many others representing an increasingly robust recent literature (cf. Aber, Keller, & Mallory, 2009; Barlett & Chase 2013; Johnston, 2012).

Despite this uneven success, however, the transformative potential sufficiently outweighs any specific instances of less-than-full implementation, as service-learning and sustainability can offer crucial resources to activate what Sipos, Battisti, and Grimm (following the work of Bloom et al., 1964) call learning with the “head, hands and heart”: “Head, hands and heart is essentially shorthand for engaging cognitive, psychomotor and affective learning domains” (2009, p. 74). International service-learning opens a pathway toward what I think of as deeply cosmopolitan experiences, that is, learning that teaches individuals how to be at ease and engaged in many different cultural contexts, an aptitude that is increasingly crucial in the transnational arenas students must learn to negotiate personally and professionally. When service-learning and sustainability combine in an international context, the potential for profound, competent, ethical education amplifies (Florman, Just, Naka, Peterson, & Seaba, 2009; Newman, 2008; Wehling, 2008).

Discussion of Program

During the winter break term of 2013-2014, 11 students traveled with my co-leader Michelle Hargrave (of the University of Minnesota Duluth Office of Civic Engagement) and me to Costa Rica for an immersive, three-week program designed to explore sustainability as a lived reality in a country that is consistently listed among the top nations globally for sustainability (Dyer, 2013) and held up by the United Nations as a model for other nations (“On First Official Visit,” 2014). Most of the students on the trip had very limited international travel experience, consisting of one or two short trips to conventional tourist destinations (i.e., Cancun, Mexico) with family members. For many of the students, this was their first sustained experience in developing a cosmopolitan perspective. The program also engaged the students in understanding the anthropological perspective that sustainability is a sociocultural issue in addition to an environmental and economic one.

The program began with a week’s stay in the capital city of San José, where students lived with middle-class Costa Rican families. In the mornings, students received intensive language instruction according to their individual proficiency level. In the afternoons, we visited sites such as a hydro-electric dam, an eco-tourist lodge and rainforest preserve, artisan communities, and sustainable coffee processors. We listened to guest talks by the Fair Trade coordinator of the coffee company as well as an international development lawyer about the unique

regulations Costa Rica has implemented around development to assure communities benefit from projects, and to minimize environmental impacts. In the evenings, students experienced the texture of daily life for urban Costa Rican families living at fairly high standards of living in comparison to other countries in Central America.

After this week of language and cultural orientation, we traveled to the rural, agricultural cooperative community of El Silencio (<http://coopesilencio.blogspot.com/p/about-el-silencio.html>) located 45 minutes from the coastal city of Quepos. El Silencio formed through the active resistance of rural workers of a former United Fruit Company banana plantation. The company pulled out of the plantation following a 1955 flood and leased the land to wealthy landowners who allowed peasant agriculture to continue on the land for the next few decades. In 1972, the workers who had dedicated their lives to the land petitioned the Costa Rican government for the right to purchase it. In 1973, 42 families founded El Silencio Cooperative. Today, 80 families (about 500 people) live and work there, and self-organize a variety of economic programs, including a palm oil plantation, an eco-tourism lodge, an animal rescue and rehabilitation center, a dairy to supply community milk needs, a community store, and more. The cooperative has its own currency system for in-community economic activity, and all cooperative employees receive half of their wages in the local currency (called *udis*) and half in Costa Rican currency. Local currency circulates within community-operated businesses (i.e., store, dairy, and lodge).

Through homestays in El Silencio, the students experienced a steep contrast in standards of living and began to understand the real effects of income inequality that are the hallmark of stratified, unsustainable, globalized society. The people of El Silencio do not experience extreme poverty; yet, when they entered the houses of their rural hosts, the students experienced directly and clearly what it means to live on less. According to the most recent CIA Factbook statistics ([Central Intelligence Agency, 2013](#)), Costa Rica's per capita GDP (U.S. \$12,900) is one-fourth that of the United States' (U.S. \$52,800).

Throughout the two weeks at the cooperative, students worked daily on tasks set by the community. For our trip, this included: working on trails the community uses for environmental education and recreation; building benches and tables for community use in key locations; painting soccer and volleyball lines at athletic fields, schools, and parks; providing children's programming during the

Christmas/New Year holiday break; caring for animals and repairing facilities at the community's wildlife rescue and rehabilitation center; and working in the community dairy. These activities are represented in the video that accompanies this article.

In addition to interactions with the citizens of Costa Rica, the students encountered other global travelers who were volunteering at the cooperative or visiting the eco-lodge. During our stay, students spent time trading insights about global travel, politics, and cultures with volunteers from Belgium, France, Italy, and elsewhere, participating in an unexpected opportunity to widen their cosmopolitan consciousness. In an interesting moment of reflection for my students, a group of resource management students from another U.S. Midwestern university stayed a few nights at the lodge while traveling around the region to see natural resource sites. My students, immersed in a cultural experience of place unlike anything most of them had encountered before, had a difficult time valuing the kind of quickly moving travel the resource management students were having.

"How can you really know this country if you don't get to know the people?" one of my students asked the others. The resource management students countered with, "But you're missing all the coolest resources by staying in one place." Both sets of students got a reminder that motivations for travel and approaches to learning have a large impact on what you gain from your experiences.

As would be imagined, the students and their host families created strong bonds in a short amount of time. Eating, recreating, and conversing regularly creates bridging social capital even when language skills sometimes hamper full discussion. Community members observed the hard work of the students on projects that the community itself had deemed important and also saw the care and sharing between the students and the children of El Silencio. At the end of our time at the cooperative, we hosted a *despedida*, or farewell party, for our hosts, during which each student gave a speech, in Spanish, touching on what they had learned during our visit and expressing thanks for the co-learning and hospitality we had been fortunate to experience. Many of the host families also felt compelled to speak and express a sense of familiarity and connection with the students. The video accompanying this piece concludes with excerpts of some of these speeches.

Reflection as a Strategy for Solidifying Service and Sustainability Learning

A key element that differentiates service-learning from other types of

experiential education, such as volunteering, is the sustained reflective work that service learners must do. As Jacoby (1996) points out in her definition:

Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key components of service-learning. (5)

My student Caitlin Nielson articulates the value of reciprocity in her comments featured in the video.

I constructed multiple opportunities for the students to reflect on their learning, including keeping a regular journal, participating in one-on-one conversations with me throughout the trip, writing a final set of reflective essays while still in Costa Rica, and leading a required public talk about her/his experiences during the semester following our trip.

Journal reflections gave the students opportunities to solidify their learning. For example, following our visit to an innovative small-footprint hydroelectric dam, one student (Brooke Wetmore) wrote the following journal entry:

We traveled out to the hydroelectric dam, which was located in the forest far down a gravel road. 80 percent of electricity in Costa Rica is produced in sustainable ways (hydro, wind, geothermal) [as reported by our guide and supported by the following report: http://www.renenergyobservatory.org/uploads/media/Costa_Rica_Producto_1_y_2_Ing_01.pdf]. The dam was located at a high elevation point, which had a large watershed. The water was fed into a system to clear out debris and control the amount of water in the system. There were a lot of procedures to prevent too much water in the system, including diverting excess to the river's natural path. Down the hill a ways the open flow water was directed into a 3-meter diameter tube for 3 km until it reaches a reservoir which holds the water in order to keep the flow constant due to contractual arrangements mandating a certain amount (varying) of energy delivered to the grid at all times. From there it goes through a waterslide looking tube down the hill where it is pressurized and gains energy through gravity. The water then goes into a generator building which holds two

turbines attached to generators attached to the substation where it is stepped up to be sent through wires to the main grid.

Generally when touring a facility like that, I'm not able to understand the process and so I usually get overwhelmed and stop paying close attention. However, since it was being translated for me, I felt like it was spoken more in layman's terms and I was able to fully understand. I love learning about sustainable development and really understanding the process. I feel like a lot of times, there are big, new, wholesome solutions that come about that seem like they will be the miracle and solve countless problems. Often times these seem to get "debunked" and criticized. I guess big fossil fuel companies' hold on the U.S. is what keeps sustainable energy from taking hold. We manipulate rivers drastically to direct water where it's not meant to be, yet we don't harness nearly as much of the energy we could.

Another student (Kathryn Ruesch) reflected in her journal on a presentation and discussion with an international development lawyer:

So many measures taken for development but these wouldn't be made without great efforts and knowledge put forward by so many parties. Made me think about Anthropological Theory class where we discussed [Foucault's idea that] knowledge = power. [With the lawyer] we had just a great discussion on globalization, development, mother nature and differing cultures and how time and ideas change.

When we arrived at El Silencio and learned that all development decisions, including the service projects we carried out, must pass through local review for sustainable benefits to the community, the students received on-the-ground confirmation of what they learned from our guest speaker.

Lively class discussions in the evenings provided students with the reflective space to process their learning and build collective understanding of the benefits and challenges of sustainable development. For example, one evening, the topic prompted both by the service work we had been doing on trails and animal pens at the wildlife rescue center and by an assigned reading critical of eco-tourism (Fletcher, 2011) centered on how the experience of eco-tourism can be unidimensional. A few students had stayed with family at resort lodges where everything was arranged and the "eco-" part of the trip consisted in simply being told that the resort did its best to recycle and minimize negative environmental

impact. In counterpoint, students reflected that a travel experience such as our service-learning trip immersed them in the daily lives of people, allowing them to see first-hand how energy and food costs affect a family's well-being, and they learned concretely how the existence of the lodge in the community provided employment to local people and provided incentives to protect fragile community lands. Students reflected on the differences between the service-learning context and conventional tourism, and responded to critical questions about how their own behaviors and approaches to travel would be different in the future as a result of having had the experience of our trip. Several of the students have communicated to me that they subsequently advocated within their own families to change travel plans to be more accountable to local economic opportunities and environmental protections, as well as to challenge conventional social boundaries between local citizens and visitors.

I also required the students to write two essays on our final day of the trip. One essay provided further space to reflect on eco-tourism as a topic, and each of the students wrote nuanced reflections on the irony of their own travel's impact on sustainability, while also analyzing the learning they gained because of the trip. One student, Caitlin Nielson, wrote:

I think the fact that I stayed at El Silencio and lived with a family gave me an opportunity most tourists don't have—I got to be part of daily life. I also got to know the people of El Silencio...leaving El Silencio was a different kind of departure than my previous travel experiences. I left a part of myself in that place. My sweat is in all the places we did work they told us needed done. My colored pencils are now in the hands of a little girl who liked me even though my Spanish was terrible.

Cross-cultural service learning can function as a catalyst for greater understanding. It can be the spark, with the potential to ignite awareness in ourselves and others touched by tourism. In my personal experience, seeing the effects of globalization in Costa Rica has helped me see it in my own culture and places I call home. However, it is not an antidote to the ills of conventional tourism. You could go back to your old ways. Fletcher may not agree that the program at El Silencio will automatically turn tourists into 'Eco Ticos,' but I can tell you one thing—you won't catch me on a cruise ship as long as cross-cultural service learning opportunities exist.

A second essay asked the students to respond to the following question: “Given your readings and your experiences during this trip, what makes Costa Rica unique in terms of culture, economics, and the ways that sustainability is thought about and practiced here?” Students responded with a variety of ideas and examples but were especially fascinated with the ways that sustainability in the cooperative was normalized in daily behaviors, including not only obvious practices such as recycling but also the collective decision-making process in the community regarding economic development. Students highlighted the way the cooperative cultivated sustainable independence by using a local currency for daily purchases, thus assuring that economic activities supported community members.

Digital Media as a Space for Reflection: The Videos that Accompany This Article

In addition to the assigned reflections, some students used class assignments in coursework during the following semester to reflect on learning during our trip. As a supplement to this article, I am sharing one such example, Lauren Flavin’s digital story entitled “Breath” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29iNMVq2hyU>), created for a colleague’s course in Critical Animal Studies. This digital story reflects subtly on how cross-cultural opportunities foreground the social dimensions of sustainability learning in a global context. Lauren’s piece exemplifies the emergence of the kind of cosmopolitan consciousness that immersive study can facilitate. It also highlights the way that “head, hands and heart” learning continues to resonate in profound ways in student growth even after the trip ends.

I filmed and photographed student activities throughout the trip using the resources of a new Participatory Media Laboratory that my colleagues in the UMD Sociology and Anthropology Department and I have created. The video I have assembled and included with this article (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5vUcPb2cnM&spfreload=10>) seeks to convey the profound engagement service-learning can foster and to evoke the ways that innovations in educational approaches can facilitate a sense of solidarity and cosmopolitanism in students. The video, while providing a celebration of the trip itself, also creates a space for consolidating and holding in digital place the memory of what the students learned. I’ve also posted on my YouTube channel an additional video of the students performing a surprise “thank you song” in which they wryly

observe that “Syring’s always got the mic and the camera by his side; how could we remember without you?”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHUgsXrV75I&spfreload=10>).

Conclusion: Reflections from Our Costa Rican Host

In the end, the students emerged with an embodied, thoughtful, cosmopolitan engagement with the frictions (Tsing, 2005) that make up our transnational world. The community received a glimpse of what engaged, compassionate, and hard-working young U.S. citizens are like. After our visit, Cristina Soto Trejos, the director of our host institution, the Costa Rican Language Academy, wrote to me about her perceptions of my students’ sojourn in the country:

I know you know this, but I just wanted to say again that your group was amazing. Your students were so motivated, hard working, appreciative, patient, polite, nice to each other, friendly, creative, fun, smart, grateful...I could go on and on.

It was wonderful to see their transformation after 22 days in Costa Rica. I can’t believe they are the same kids that hardly spoke a few words in Spanish when I met them, that were scared to meet their host families, that were foreign tourists in this country. Yesterday [at the final party] I was amazed to hear them chatting in Spanish with their mama tica, to learn about their experiences in El Silencio, to hear how they now feel like part of our community and don't feel like foreigners anymore. They would be insulted to be labeled "tourists" as the other visitors they met.

They are in a totally different category now: honorary ticos, global citizens and aware of so many things these tourists are clueless about.

I know it sounds dramatic but I truly believe that you just changed the lives of these students. Maybe in a small way, but it will have an impact on their perspective of the world, of travelling and of other cultures from now on. You expanded their horizons and planted a small seed in their minds and hearts that will grow.

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The documentary film he created with Manuel Benigno Cango and the Saraguro women's cooperative La Cooperativa Teresa de Calcuta, is part of an on-going series of participatory media projects with indigenous Saraguro collaborators. Visit his YouTube channel at:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdy4ILboqOr8NLNSeEFgLzw>