



A student participates in coffee picking at an agricultural cooperative in Nicaragua.

Service Learning in the Context of Short-term Programs

We recognize a growing interest in service learning programs on college campuses and within faith communities. That interest extends to combining service learning with international travel. The Center for Global Education staff has discovered that it is not always easy to structure meaningful service learning programming into short-term educational programs. In fact, service-learning can focus entirely on the helping relationship and actually impede what participants can learn from the experience.

The Center frequently gets requests to incorporate service learning into an international travel seminar. However, we see our mission as educational rather than service, with more emphasis on ‘community engagement’ and learning. Within our educational philosophy, we believe that participants must take time to learn, analyze, and reflect on what they experienced—a process our staff facilitates. Then they can plan the action they wish to take or “service” they would

like to work with the community to provide. Therefore, there is often not time to fully time to do service learning within the context of a short travel experience, especially in a different cultural context.

Within our objective of community engagement, we have identified ways to satisfy service learning needs and incorporate opportunities that can both be beneficial to the travel group as well as the host community. Goals for the engagement are to:

- serve the communities of both the travel group and the host community so that learning can take place from each other,
- tap into a longer term partnership that the Center has with the community,
- set an educational foundation and context prior to service for the experience to foster deeper learning.

Our highest priority is to plug into ongoing community projects rather than creating a new project for a group. Participants engage in reflection and analysis throughout the experience in order to deepen their learning. When a group engages in an interaction with a community, they become part of the Center's ongoing relationship with that group. It's not just a one-time interaction for the community or CGE staff.

One goal of these experiences is to reflect on the assumptions we as North Americans bring to the situation and consider why we may be quick to want to move to action. Our goal is to analyze the underlying causes of need within the community and also to examine ways of bringing about structural change.

Some of our first experiences of service learning were working with a Habitat for Humanity building project in Mexico. This was an ongoing project that the community requested, so there was a structure for connecting a group with the project for a few days without the project being dependent on our involvement. That meant that it would continue after our group left. Another common service activity in Mexico is for a group to hear about HIV/AIDS work done by a small organization while they help to stuff information packets that will be distributed throughout the city. Because the organization is so small, having this service is very beneficial to them. For more active learners, this can help to deepen their learning while they feel that they are contributing positively to a community effort.

In Nicaragua, to strengthen learning about organic coffee production and fair trade, participants may try coffee picking while visiting an agricultural cooperative, finding out firsthand how difficult this task is! While learning about coffee

growing, they also have an opportunity to learn about the benefits and limitation of fair trade from the experience of the coffee growers in the cooperative.

In the last few years we have been working with more medical studies programs for immersion trips. A good example of a reciprocal relationship was set up between Boston College nursing students and the Jubilee House in Nicaragua. During a one week trip, the nursing students spend the mornings working in a community health clinic sponsored by Jubilee House. Some see patients, some work in the pharmacy, and others file paperwork. During the afternoons, the nursing students learn about the healthcare system in Nicaragua and the realities of poverty and development in the same way as other international travel seminars. Early in the week, the nursing students meet with members of the community to identify issues that the women want to learn about, and then on the last day in Nicaragua the students present a workshop to the women addressing those issues. The workshop is done in popular education format, with graphs, hands-on activities, and active learning. It is a program that deepens the learning for the US nursing students and provides a service that is of benefit to the community.

Service-learning within the context of ongoing engagement with a community can provide a meaningful action step to deeper learning. The long term relationships CGE has built with local communities provides a context for exploring underlying causes of need, ways of bringing about structural change, and the resilience and resources within the community while making a positive contribution to the community. The ultimate goal is shared learning and mutual benefit for both parties.