Listening to Santa Rita: A Critical Examination of Service-learning Practice

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Listening to Santa Rita: A Critical Examination of Service-Learning Practice

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Abstract

While participating in a short-term service-learning-based course in Honduras, the authors interviewed residents of Santa Rita, a small high-poverty village, concerning their perceptions of the impact of service groups working in the community. This article presents the interview findings interwoven with the authors' personal reflections. One author addresses the question of whether service work is fostering dependency among community members. The second author describes her awakening to the reality that her initial perception of the community's values and needs differed from those of community members. The third author describes the community members' lack of awareness that the act of service and the relationships built across borders is as much a gift for those providing service as for those receiving it. Following the reflections, the faculty director provides implications for effectively leading service-learning programs.

In June 2009, 14 students from the Ohio University College of Education traveled to Central America and partnered with a non-governmental organization (NGO), Honduras Outreach International (HOI), for a two-week service-learning-based program. Santa Rita is a small village, located in the rural department (i.e., state) of Olancho, and includes approximately 75 families. The village of Santa Rita is characteristic of other small villages in this high-poverty area of Honduras. When the first service team arrived at the village in 2002, Santa Rita had no school building, no electrical supply, and no latrine facilities. Nearly all of the houses were one-room buildings, often occupied by multigenerational families with as many as 8–10 people. Seven years later, when our team arrived in Santa Rita, the community had electrical power, a one-room school building, almost all houses in the village had latrine facilities, and most houses were multiroom. Much of this work had been accomplished by community members with financial and physical support from HOI-sponsored teams from the United States (personal communication, Emily Grossman, November 4, 2009).

The Ohio University group was the fourth service team to work in Santa Rita over seven years. Students in the service-learning course spent their nights in a local ranch that was owned and operated by HOI. Each morning the HOI staff drove the service group to the village where students worked. Some members of the team volunteered to work on construction projects,

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which included building latrines, putting additions on houses, and pouring cement floors in houses. Others worked in the small one-room school building, leading recreational and craft activities for the children. Late in the afternoon, the class members returned to HOI's ranch, where they maintained reflection journals and held class meetings to discuss their experiences in the evening.

The nature of this service-learning course is not merely to offer service or to practice service-learning but to learn about applying this pedagogy in future educational practice. Our conversations in Honduras—both formal and informal—as well as discussions about cross-cultural interaction that occurred through several class meetings before we even left the United States established an important backdrop for our interactions with people in the community of Santa Rita.

Several of the students participating in the Ohio University service-learning program conducted research projects supplementing the service activities and course work. One team researched mental health concerns and support services for people in rural Honduras. Another group researched post-secondary educational access issues. Our team conducted interviews in the village in order to understand better the impact that the HOI-sponsored service teams had made on the quality of life in the community.

Method

We employed a basic interpretive qualitative methodology (Merriam, 2002), interviewing eight members of the community to understand better their perceptions of the impact of the work of service groups in their village. The entire research team participated in interviews. We interviewed adults of different ages, as well as adolescents. We also sought gender diversity by interviewing males and females. Research participants included village leaders and others who did not have any formal authority within the community.

We employed a semi-structured interview (Patton, 2002), which allowed us to focus our inquiry on areas of interest, while also providing flexibility to pursue a deeper understanding of the phenomena of interest. Questions included: "What process is used to decide which projects to carry out?" "How are community members selected to receive help with projects?" "What difference has been made by the presence of the service groups in Santa Rita?" "What are your hopes for the future of your family, for Santa Rita, and this region?" and "What can service groups do to help you achieve your goals?"

Each participant was interviewed once. The interviews took place during our last three days in the village. Because the village was small, we interacted with the research participants frequently and had opportunities to learn about their lives and families through informal interactions as well as through the formal interviews. We each maintained field notes concerning our interactions with members of the community. The formal interviews were mediated by an experienced bilingual interpreter, and were audio-taped.

Upon returning to the United States, we transcribed the English translations of the interviews verbatim and analyzed the transcripts and field notes to determine themes. During a preliminary discussion of the findings, we had consensus that the community members we interviewed were very positive about the work of the service teams. The Santa Ritans expressed appreciation for the ways that these groups had materially affected their lives through the construction projects and school-based activities. In addition, they spoke positively of relationships they had built with North Americans who had lent support to their village.

Because we were serving two roles—as members of the service team and as researchers—we were concerned about the validity of our finding that the community members

were pleased with every facet of the work of the service groups. Merriam (1998) described some of the issues surrounding participant researchers accordingly: "At the very least, participants who know they are being observed will tend to behave in socially acceptable ways and present themselves in a favorable manner" (p. 103). As we discussed the potential complications associated with our dual role, the discussion evolved into reflection on our roles as researchers, as well as the significant questions derived from the interviews that had remained with us since our time in Santa Rita.

We proceeded to document and analyze our reflections, resulting in an autoethnographic analysis. Autoethnography, according to Patton (2002), "combines inquiry into a cultural phenomenon of interest with personal reflection on and experience of that phenomenon" (p. 138). Our work included both independent and collaborative elements. Each of us wrote independently and then shared our thoughts with one another in written form. After reading each other's work, we then came together to discuss, challenge, and refine these reflections. This process resulted in the reflections presented below.

Reflections

Angela: Genuine Thankfulness or Desperate Dependency?

> *And it can't just be throwing money at people. That doesn't solve any problem. Puts a band-aid on it though. But band-aids fall off . . . . This is a struggle because I think of myself as a good, caring person. I want to help. But does it really help if their only solution is that WE will come back to do what needs to be done? How do we help them to be their own solution? Or is that just my American individualism talking?* (From Angela's journal on June 16 and 20, 2009)

I am a second-year student in the College Student Personnel program at Ohio University and am from a middle-class family near Cleveland. My interest in service-learning was spurred by a practicum experience in the university's Campus Involvement Center during which I researched the topic and ways in which other universities incorporate service-learning into their curricula. In deciding to participate in the Service-Learning in Honduras program I hoped to understand the concept better by experiencing it, not just through a theoretical lens, but also firsthand. As a former elementary school teacher and future student affairs practitioner, education has always been an interest of mine. Also, I had pursued service through various community endeavors and was interested in learning how the two could be paired in order to enhance student development and learning.

Since the Honduras program was my first venture abroad, I wasn't exactly sure what to expect. Aware that I was traveling to one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere, I certainly was not expecting a luxury vacation and was prepared to roll up my sleeves and get to work. I wanted to make a difference. The trip was to be not only an experience that would change me personally and professionally, but also the first of many such endeavors. Part of me was excited to explore new lands and meet new people, while the remainder was terrified that I would hate the work, and all the people I met would see me as a naïve and privileged woman who had never put in a hard day's work in her life.

As the trip progressed and I became comfortable in the small village of Santa Rita, I found that in spite of how physically challenging it was, the work was quite enjoyable and rewarding. Also immediately noticeable were the speed and efficiency with which the people of

Santa Rita worked. Every movement was in perfect rhythm; a beat was never missed. Groups of five workers shoveled heavy loads of wet cement in perfect synchronization, and I began to realize that my help was not actually needed. This left me wondering about the purpose of my presence in Santa Rita.

Further compounding my confusion were the numerous expressions of gratitude and thankfulness coming my way from the community members of the village. Nearly every person we interviewed expressed thanks and wished for God to bless us. Particularly striking was the thankfulness of one man. During our interview with him, regardless of the questions we posed, his response ended with an expression of thanks and a plea for us to remember Santa Rita and come back in the future. His words, as stated by our translator, were, "Please come back . . . we will *always* be waiting for you." I began to wonder if these words were genuine expressions of thankfulness or indicators of a desperate dependency.

The truth of the matter is that while our money paid for the projects, it seemed evident that the community members did not need our help in physically carrying them out. This lack of need was never verbalized, but the fact was clear to us based on our seeing the skill and efficiency with which the Santa Ritans worked. Our job was to watch and learn, jumping in to take a turn when we felt confident. The community members knew exactly what to do, and I remember feeling very inadequate. In spite of my feelings of inadequacy, I never once felt unwelcome. On the contrary, each day our team was greeted with open arms and many cheerful "Holas." Any feelings of doubt about the reason for, and importance of, our presence in the village were solely a result of my own insecurities.

Striving for constant optimism, I wanted to know that I made a difference and knew that in the short term I had. The fact that I helped to lay cement floors in homes that previously had dirt floors infested with fleas, and that families had space and shelter because I helped them to build additions to their homes out of mud could not be denied. The many hugs I received from my new friends on my last day in Santa Rita would not be quickly forgotten, and I did not doubt that the people of Santa Rita were genuinely glad to have had us as guests in their village. However, no matter how much I strove for optimism, I was a realist at heart. In spite of the presence of obvious short-term benefits to the village that resulted in part due to my presence and hard work, I grappled to pinpoint any long-term benefits. If the man we interviewed was correct in saying that the people of Santa Rita were always going to be waiting for our return, I wondered if we had really helped them at all.

If all our work in Honduras did was to leave the people of Santa Rita desperately waiting for our heroic return, I had a hard time believing that we did much good there. It seemed as though instead I had helped them to create a dependence upon me, or others like me. Although the room additions I helped to fund and build were much needed, what was a resident of Santa Rita to do in a few years when another addition was needed? My feeling was that our ultimate goal should be to help others become self-sufficient, perhaps by creating jobs, improving education, or installing an irrigation system to enable year-round farming. It was unclear whether they or I took away more from these shared experiences. My experiences in Honduras forever changed me, but what was to become of the Hondurans? Maybe they were a little more comfortable, but at the end of the day were they still just waiting for us to come back?

My intent is not to leave things on a negative note. In no way did I intend to insinuate that service-learning groups make no difference in the communities in which they work, or that my time spent in Santa Rita was meaningless and without purpose. However, I have realized that the purpose is other than I had initially expected. Initially, my vision for the purpose and outcomes of my time in Honduras was one of grandeur; somehow, going on this trip was supposed to be the first of many steps in my single-handed attempt to save the world. After I came home from Honduras, I struggled, and still struggle, in trying to determine my next step.

At first it seemed to me that leaving Honduras certain that I had equipped each and every community member with the tools of self-sufficiency would be the ultimate accomplishment. In retrospect, however, I realize this goal would not have been possible, and such a goal would not have been the ultimate accomplishment. The problems in Honduras are real, and yes, they need to be addressed, but the fact that I did not manage to solve them all in two weeks does not negate the value of my experience, although there have been points in my life since I returned home that it felt as if it did. Beyond questioning the benefits of our service work, there have been times I questioned my decision to pursue a career in student affairs and thought that there had to be an alternate path through which my impact on poverty eradication could be increased. It did not feel like it was enough simply to work with students, focusing on widening their perspectives and perhaps inspiring them to make the world a better, more equitable place.

My experiences in Honduras have altered who I am, and I truly believe the Hondurans were impacted by me as well, just not as I had originally thought they might be. In the end, I would not have it any other way. After experiencing much inner conflict, I have come to realize that it is up to me to decide how I will go about making a difference in the world and that whether my difference is big or small does not matter. Months after returning home I can look back and see that my feelings of not having done enough were a result of guilt and uncertainty regarding how to go about resolving it. Whether I choose to work as an academic advisor, coordinate service-learning experiences for students, dedicate my efforts to a local non-profit organization, or pack up and move to Honduras does not matter as much as how I go about doing whatever it is that I decide to do. At this point the direction I will pursue is still unclear, but I know that my experiences in Honduras will accompany me. The fact that this experience changed me has inspired me to want to instigate such changes in others, and these changes can be accomplished regardless of the job title I hold. In the end, the key to a better world is increasing awareness and motivation to make change. The more people I can work to inspire, the larger the difference. In retrospect, I can see clearly that it was foolish to ever think I had to do it alone.

Brandi: Whose Goals Are These Anyway?

If you haven't had good conversations, with your eyes open, with at least twenty-five poor people before you start designing [solutions], don't bother. (Polak, 2008, p. 75)

As a college student personnel master's student, participating in the Honduras service-learning study abroad program was a goal that I wanted to accomplish before the completion of my graduate studies. Having never traveled outside of the United States, I recognized that an experience such as this would provide me with an opportunity to learn more about a culture different from my own. In addition, I looked forward to providing assistance to individuals whose financial situation limited their ability to have essential necessities. So, I committed myself to going to Honduras at the end of the first year of my degree program.

Before leaving I listed several goals that I wanted to accomplish. My first goal was to complete successfully all of the stated service assignments, such as the construction of mud homes, latrines, and cement floors for several homes. My second goal was to immerse myself as fully into the service-learning trip as possible. Although I was nervous about being in a different country, I was excited about the experience that awaited me.

 Upon our arrival in Santa Rita, we were greeted by the community members, taken to selected homes to lay cement floors, and shown how to mix cement. As work progressed on the floors, I thought of additional services that future service groups could provide. The projects that

I thought would be beneficial included constructing paved roads, providing electricity for each home and maybe even indoor bathrooms. However, I soon realized that my ideas were problematic for two reasons. First, the cost would be too great, and second, although I felt that these projects would be beneficial for the village, the members of Santa Rita may have had other ideas about what would truly make a difference for their lives.

As the work progressed, I spoke with other service members about their thoughts regarding the importance and necessity of services we were providing. We were all aware that our notions of appropriate service projects also reflected our personal biases. When we conducted our interviews with community members of the Santa Rita village, we gained insight about how HOI and the community members decide on the projects that we complete, as well as the projects that the villages would like to see completed in the future.

To discover the needs of the community, we asked the community members several questions. From the community leader we learned that the community members decide among themselves which individuals receive projects for the year by holding meetings with members of the village and a representative from HOI. A list is then created of the families who desire projects and those with the greatest need are chosen. I wrote about this in my journal: "Learning this reminded me of the importance of incorporating the thoughts of those receiving services." If we had chosen what we thought should be done rather than what the individuals who were to receive this assistance thought, we would have ultimately neglected the voice of the community members and, thus, may not have met their needs.

When we asked the community members about their hopes for Santa Rita and the Agalta Valley, many of them explained their desire to construct a larger school building for their children. One person stated,

> There are a lot of needs in this village but first we hope to have the school because there are more than 70 students and they are using the kindergarten (i.e., one very small, one-room building) and we want to have children that learn every day the best they can.

I was not surprised by their desire for a school building. However, I was surprised that my original thoughts for projects failed to consider the construction of a school. This further demonstrated the importance of not forming judgments about the services needed but, rather, of consulting with the community members to assist them with the services that they would like to have completed.

When we asked individuals about how service groups can help them to achieve their individual goals, we heard a range of answers. One person responded, "We would like to have an irrigation system because we would like to grow vegetables. . . . There is not enough water." Another young girl asked "if the groups can help me to become somebody special . . . like a teacher or a doctor," while others asked if we could return more frequently. As I listened to their responses I recognized that the needs expressed by the community members represented opportunities that would enable the community members to become more self-sufficient, whereas the service goals that I was so proud of completing only provided short-term relief. In a few years new latrines will be needed, the mud homes will begin to deteriorate, and new shingles will be required to maintain the roofs. At this point I realized that my original thoughts about service-learning projects were vastly different from the real needs of the community.

Two interviews, with teenagers, were particularly poignant. Concluding our interview with a girl named Demis, we asked, "What would you like to do when you are older?" Demis responded that she would like to be a teacher, or maybe a doctor. When she stated this, our translator, Victoria, a Honduran woman who works for the NGO, jumped in and said that it would be better for her to be a teacher. This was shocking to me because as a child I was never limited in

my career choice. Hearing Victoria suggest that Demis's options did not include being a doctor was heartbreaking. I wrote in my journal that day,

> As an African American youth the thought that I could pursue any career that I chose was supported by the opportunity and realistic availability of a higher education. Although I faced an abundance of obstacles the support and encouragement I received were endless.

However, the more I think about this, the more I realize that, truthfully, aspiring to be a teacher may be the best and only realistic hope for Demis to have a life as a professional. Honduras is a country where only 8% of the population attends post-secondary education (Mollis, 2007). It is primarily for Honduras's most elite economic class. In a later section of my journal I wrote, "Although these are normal aspirations for American children to have, I wondered if she would be able to accomplish any of these plans because of her family's financial limitations."

Jadiel, a hard-working teenage boy, informed us that his major hopes consisted of having a home and a family. He planned to stay in or near the village of Santa Rita—a village that, in our minds, had little hope of attaining many of the life and career goals that we had imagined for ourselves or for the children of Santa Rita.

Throughout this service-learning program I noticed a growth in the level of critical consciousness of other service participants and myself. Paulo Freire (1970) explained that conscientization is a process that individuals experience as they encounter a powerful emotional experience that requires a deeper analysis than do situations that are commonplace. In this case, our notions of the hopes and goals of the Santa Ritans were consistently dispelled. This is not a bad thing; in fact it actually showed us that life does not have to be lived one way or with a single set of goals. Although the community members of the Santa Rita village had limited resources, the care and happiness that they exhibited toward one another appeared to make their circumstances less harsh. Indeed their interdependence seemed to enrich their lives.

Katie: Awareness of Benefits

> *I think that we aren't really here to help at all—they can do the work without us. It's the money that's most helpful. So what is the purpose of service-learning? Is it more of a cultural exchange? Talking to one another, enjoying each other's company, learning about how each other lives?* (From Katie's journal on June 16, 2009, Day 2 in community)

I participated in the service-learning trip to Honduras due to my intersecting interests in education, social justice, and development. As an undergraduate education major, I spent three months living in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, teaching at a diverse high school. The insights I gained into the powerful recent history of the country and how it affected public education fueled my passion for social justice outside the United States. After spending the next two years teaching 7th and 8th grade mathematics at a rural Appalachian school, I returned to graduate school to study social, cultural, and political impacts on education, including participating in the learning experience in Honduras. The service-learning trip to Honduras was my second trip abroad, so I was prepared to face mental and emotional challenges. However, as this was my first service trip, I wasn't yet sure how I would be affected by my work and how the community members would react to our group.

When I started thinking about my goals for the trip, the term "service-learning" stuck in my mind. Even though I knew our group would engage in physically challenging service work

for the community, I realized that my goals for the trip firmly centered on my development as a person. I wanted to learn as much as I could during our two weeks in Honduras, including how to build floors and improve my basic Spanish skills. More importantly, I wanted to learn from the community members in Honduras, including their daily lives and values. I also realized that my situation in Honduras would be unfamiliar, in both location and opportunities, and I would be able to learn about myself and grow as a person as I met these new challenges. I knew that I would feel uncomfortable and helpless when I couldn't overcome the language barrier, and I was eager to see how I would handle these situations.

Once we arrived in the community and began the service work, I quickly realized that my physical labor was not needed. The "service" in "service-learning" was truly the most inconsequential part. The villagers split themselves into teams, picked up the supplies, and started working. Our job was to watch, try to understand the process of mixing concrete or building walls, and jump in when we felt like we could help. This only cemented my goals for personal development over service, and made me wonder about the true purpose of service-learning. If it wasn't to provide service, since we obviously weren't needed, then it must be to learn from one another.

Despite my conviction that my main purpose for being in Honduras was personal growth, it seemed that the members of the community felt otherwise. One of our interview questions, "How do you think the lives of the people in the service groups have been changed by working with you in Santa Rita?", was frequently met with confusion. Victoria, our interpreter, would rephrase and explain the question, and still many of the community members would shake their heads with uncertainty and say, "Nothing." It appeared to us that they had never considered the personal benefits of our work. Other people misinterpreted the meaning of the question and explained how the community had been affected. Some remarked very generally that the groups have had positive experiences, while moving quickly to a description of community benefits. One man spoke about the projects and supplies received from the groups, and explained, "It has been changing a lot for the people that live here, and also . . . it has been a very good thing that you have been doing for the people of Santa Rita." Another answered generally, "For the groups it has been a benefit and also for the people that live here."

The community members who did understand the meaning of the question seemed confused and paused before answering. Their responses seemed to follow two themes: altruism and religious rewards. The first theme, altruism, was evident when some of the community members explained that the service groups came to help the community with selfless motives. The community members explained that we came because we want to help them. According to one man, "They are coming here just to serve and help the poor people of Santa Rita." One person paused and then simply said that the service groups come "because they help us." The rest of the answers seemed to revolve around the second theme, rewards that we would receive for our work in the village, including both personal satisfaction and religious karma. One person said, "When you come here, you feel like you have done everything for us, and you feel satisfaction to do this kind of work." This person continued to assure us that we would receive rewards for our good service. Another said, "God is going to pay you for everything that you have done for these people in Santa Rita."

While I was participating in these interviews, my impression was that this was the first time the community members had considered why groups choose to come to Santa Rita. It seemed as though they only conceived of the physical work that we did for the community and how we sacrificed our time and resources for the community members. My impression was that they did not consider that we gained something of value from joining them in this work. They did not seem to express the lessons we learned from being with them that did not involve the tangible results of our work, but instead involved changes within ourselves. The benefits we took

home with us were profound: life lessons about interacting with other cultures, teamwork, and appreciation.

I have come to realize that service-learning is characterized by a symbiotic relationship. The community members may not realize that our lives have been affected by our work and travel in Honduras, and we may not feel like we are needed to do the work in the community, but the truth is that both groups benefit from the kindness and openness of the others. The members of the community truly appreciate the work we do for them, as inconsequential as we may feel our hands-on help had been, and we cherish our experiences and cognitive shifts as a result. We both leave the experience with our minds and hearts forever changed.

Pete: Faculty Member's Discussion on Leading Service-Learning

As illustrated by the reflections above, students engaged in service-learning often begin with high hopes for bringing their developed world wisdom, resources, and technology to assist people in crisis. However, engagement in service has the potential to challenge many preconceptions and to propel rich and important reflections on the meaning and significance of service-learning.

Students' struggles run parallel to my own questions about the purposes of this work and generate valuable possibilities for enhancing service-learning experiences. As a program leader and teacher, I began my own service-learning project with a narrow set of goals. I wanted to foster awareness of world poverty and future commitment to civic engagement. Indeed, I remain steadfast about the importance of these goals. However, as illustrated by these participants' reflections, I also see that the experience can be much more.

Angela's reflections raise important questions that are at the core of "helping relationships." When is it appropriate to lend a hand? When I am engaging in service and feeling better about myself, am I actually undermining real benefit to others? It is reasonable and even appropriate for students to ask themselves critically, "What is it that I bring to another in this relationship?" As suggested by Butin (2005), service-learning is a self-contesting experience that provides a context for exploring deeply important questions about oneself in relationship to the world. Importantly, as illustrated by Angela, service-learning programs present a complex power dynamic between the providers and receivers of service, and this power and its consequences should be critically examined by service-learning directors and participants.

Parks (2000) described critical thought as "the capacity to step outside of one's own thought and reflect upon it as object, to recognize multiple perspectives and the relativized character of one's own experience and assumptions" (p. 143). One way in which I intentionally introduce self-contesting inquiry into the Honduras program is by having students read a critique of international service work by Illich (1968). In Illich's speech to a group of international educators, he declared, "I am here to challenge you to recognize your inability, your powerlessness, and your incapacity to do the 'good' which you intended to do" (p. 4). Furthermore, he maintained that an insidious superiority inevitably exists among participants in service programs from the United States traveling to the developing world. In the midst of the Honduras service-learning experience, we wrestle with Illich's perspective, interrogating its possible merits and shortcomings. My goal is that students will examine the power implications inherent in service work and question openly the real benefits of our work to the communities we purport to serve.

By introducing the critical inquiry described above, the potential exists for this type of questioning to result in a sense of loss for the student (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003). In the case illustrated by Angela's reflection, this manifests as a loss of a previously held

conception of the "good" that she was hoping to accomplish for Hondurans living in poverty. Parks (2000) pointed out that it is important that the process of fostering critical thought occurs in a supportive, mentoring environment. For example, as students begin to question the merits of service work as they have previously conceived it, a supportive environment, including an attentive instructor, should gently encourage students to "awaken more adequate means of seeing and believing" (Parks, p. 143). A service-learning director may do this by validating students' processes of grieving the loss of the old and through inviting alternate and perhaps more complex viewpoints into the dialogue, thereby presenting new ways of finding meaning through service. Alternate viewpoints may come from other class members, from readings, or from the program faculty or staff.

In addition to the threat of loss to students, there is also the reality that some questions and challenges can threaten a director's sacrosanct belief in the merits of the experience. As a service-learning director, I am learning to embrace the unresolved tensions that manifest for my students and for me. Like any rich educational experience for young adults, learning to live with vexing questions is as important as finding resolutions. In practice, this means that, in my role as leader, I demonstrate appreciation for students' emerging questions, even when they are in tension with my own perceptions of the meaning or significance of service-learning.

Brandi's reflection highlights the value of listening to the voices of service recipients. In his thoughtful discussion of how to deal most effectively with the daunting problem of world poverty, Polak (2008) asserted the importance of listening to the community members in order to achieve real solutions. Understanding the centrality of this simple principle should be an important goal of all service-learning activities. As Polak pointed out, many resources are poured into poverty solutions in ineffectual ways. Little of significance can actually be accomplished without attending to the voices of the ones we hope to serve.

For those of us coming from the perspective of the "haves," a core part of the service-learning experience should be to understand how our conceptions of community needs are contextually constructed and, thus, they set boundaries on or restrict our understanding of others' lives and experiences. That is to say, when my students or I consider our hopes and goals for community members in Santa Rita, or other high-poverty communities, it is important to view others beyond our customary lens. Those of us who have grown up in the developed world may be subject to values and goals that block our view and appreciation of the richness of an interdependent, community-oriented life that is part of the everyday experience of Santa Ritans. As my students and I conceive our own constructions of what life *should* be like for members of a community such as this, we need to be aware that these preconceptions limit our understanding of the complexities, including positive and negative experiences, of a particular culture. I learned from these students' reflections that formal research projects such as this one or other intentionally structured listening opportunities can provide meaningful and effective ways for students to understand better the relativity of their values.

In addition to opening oneself to unexpected community needs, listening to others can help take the student out of herself and into openness with others. Intercultural competence among participants is among the most prized goals of service-learning work (Jones, Gilbride-Brown, & Gasiorski, 2005). Brandi indicates that her ability to recognize her own privilege was boosted by her conversations with and observations of community members. Surely there is no foolproof way to overcome some participants' resistance to learning to see the world or themselves in a new way, but directors can enhance opportunities for success by setting up formal opportunities for participants and community members to listen to one another.

The importance of understanding service-learning as an experience in mutuality was poignantly discussed by Rhoads (1997) and was highlighted by Katie in her essay. In the case of

the Hondurans that we interviewed, none acknowledged the powerful rewards the service-learners gained from participation in this work. As a result, members of the Santa Rita community viewed themselves solely as receivers of the generosity of others. This reality highlighted the importance of creating opportunities to share with "service recipients" the benefits that we in the service-learning team receive through being in relationship with them. Whereas Brandi's reflections focused on listening, Katie's reflection suggests the importance of a two-way conversation. While it might be most important for cross-cultural visitors to focus on listening, I believe that there is merit to sharing our experience as service-learners with community members as well. I cannot assume that another person will understand my engagement experience any more than I can understand her lived experience. If we believe that the relationship matters, then a two-way conversation can be valuable for all.

One activity that is commonplace at the end of a week of service in Honduras is sharing of gifts between the service group and community members. Often the community will pool their resources and purchase soda and chips for service group participants. Because of limited resources, community members only buy enough of these snacks for the service groups—not for themselves. This often results in guilty feelings and, sometimes, a resistance by group members to accept the gifts. I believe that we need to welcome the gifts that those living in poverty are willing and often eager to share with us, even when the sacrifices they make result in our discomfort. A relationship is not mutual when there is a sense that one group is dependent upon the other. The reward of mutuality will occur only when all participants understand that they have the power to contribute to the lives of one another.

All three students in their reflections raised issues that can be instructive for those leading service-learning programs. As a director, I also know that questions and issues such as these can challenge my own understanding of the goals and efficacy of service work. I sometimes hope that students will simply accept that these experiences are good for them and are good for those they are serving. However, when I listen to considerations like those presented by Angela, Brandi, and Katie, I know that these experiences can contribute to their learning more than I originally hoped.

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