Exploring the Impact of Global Service Learning

Preface

As an educator, I seek to provide meaningful connections that provide the space for authentic learning, and through my experience leading global service learning (GSL) projects I have witnessed connections that can be personally and socially transformative. Observing these transformations in GSL participants, I have come to believe that GSL can have a positive impact on the development of cross-cultural empathy, global awareness, and critical thinking skills in our youth. As a teacher of young adults in an increasingly globalized world, I cannot imagine a more valuable place to direct my energy. It is from this place that I chose to explore the short-term impacts of GSL on participants through original research in Cambodia. My goal is to provide leadership in global citizenship education by informing ethical, sustainable, and impactful GSL curricular development for adolescents.

The bigger picture: Why research global service learning?

As GSL programs in secondary schools and post-secondary education are steadily increasing, the quality and efficacy of these programs vary greatly, and there are vast discrepancies in GSL program development and delivery (see: Billig, 2000; Bringle, et.al., 2012; Niehaus & Crain, 2013; Tonkin, 2011; Whitley, 2014). While there is no standard definition, GSL programs generally attempt to combine the ideals of service-learning, international education, and intercultural learning opportunities (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011) to create an environment for GSL students to participate in cultural immersion, to assist in community-focused humanitarian development tasks, and to reflect on their experiences (Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004).

Although educators and researchers have a general understanding that GSL programs in practice have a distinct transformative impact on participants (Kiely, 2004), research identifying the specific changes that occur and how and why these changes occur is limited and Kiely (2005) calls for further research to "investigate the contextual factors and learning processes in service learning that lead to reported outcomes" (Kiely, 2005, p. 5). There is also a need for increased rigour in the field of GSL research (Whitley, 2014) guided by a more comprehensive research agenda (Tonkin, 2011) to inform GSL research and practice. Therefore, this research has the potential to inform meaningful and ethical interactions between GSL programs in secondary schools and host communities, and I provide curricular recommendations based firmly in the research below.

Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of GSL is the potential to support unhealthy cross-cultural power dynamics by exacerbating misrepresentations of economic, political, and social inequalities between *haves* and *have-nots*. As Grusky (2000) attests:

> *Without thoughtful preparation, orientation, program developments and the encouragement of study, as well as critical analysis and reflection, the programs can easily become small theaters that recreate historic cultural misunderstandings and simplistic stereotypes and replay, on a more intimate scale, the huge disparities in income and opportunity that characterize North-South relations today. (p. 858)*

Therefore, embarking on global service learning education is a huge responsibility. Like any educational program, to meet the need for thoughtful GSL programming, Pickeral, Lennon, and Piscatelli (2008) emphasize the necessity of focusing on: vision and leadership, curriculum and assessment, community-school partnerships, professional development, and continuous improvement within GSL programs.

GSL programming has gained popularity globally and more and more students speak of the transformative power of such an experience.

Research Methodology

To conduct this research, I applied a descriptive qualitative case study approach, exploring the short-term impacts of the Cambodia Service Project (CSP)—a three-week GSL program designed by Round Square (RS) and a local NGO—on an international group of participants, aged 15-18 years. In order to collect a broad spectrum of participant experiences, I used opening and closing questionnaires; semi-structured individual interviews; and visual arts based reflection. I included written, oral, and artistic methods of data collection to support enthusiastic participant engagement for different types of learners; breadth and richness of information collected; and triangulation of data. Participants also took part in guided journal entries that were not collected for data analysis. All data was analyzed inductively, and themes were identified based participants' description of their experiences. Where possible, the data was then situated within previous GSL literature to provide a thoughtful discussion on the impact of short-term GSL experiences on adolescent participants, and possible repercussions for GSL curricular recommendations in secondary schools.

Findings

Through participant interviews, reflections, and artistic interpretations four main themes emerged as a reflection of adolescents' experience in Cambodia, and are tied into global citizenship education below. The areas in which GSL participants expressed a change were: relationship with self; relationship with others; relationship with culture, ways of living, and environment; and relationship with different perspectives, attitudes, and ways of knowing.

Relationship with Self

The reflective nature of the data collection encouraged research participants to analyze and understand their own personal experiences, insights, and interpretations. Through this process, participants repeatedly expressed a change in their relationship with themselves. Specifically, they developed greater self-awareness and self-confidence, learned physical and social skills, clarified future direction and goals, and embraced the process of learning through challenge.

Relationship with Others

CSP participants expressed better understanding of the importance of developing and navigating relationships, and learning with, and from, others. They spoke about building empathy and valuing individual contributions of others; developing interpersonal relationships with their peers and hosts; and the role of friendships and community.

Relationship with Culture, Ways of Living, and Environment

"You can't just stay in one country and get bored of your own. You become so one-minded. And then you just think that your home country is the culture all the way around the world. But, although there are similarities the small differences make a major impact on how you view other cultures." (CSP Participant)

Undoubtedly, each student left Cambodia with some increased knowledge and understanding about the culture, different ways of life, and the environment that they lived and volunteered in for three weeks. Through this process they developed the ability to engage cross-culturally: "I have a better understanding of what it's like to go into a new place and learn more about it" (CSP Participant). Each participant constructed their own cultural understandings within the context of their perspectives and life experiences. As such, learning went beyond simply Cambodia, their host country; participants noted that interactions with their global peers helped them to learn about varied ethnic, political, and social contexts. Interestingly, all participants noted that learning about Cambodia, and the home countries of other participants, directly *from the horse's mouth,* was important to influence participants' understanding of culture, ways of life, and environment.

Relationship with Different Perspectives, Attitudes, and Ways of Knowing

"This experience was different from any experience I had in my whole life. This experience made me learn, made me more positive. It brought about some changes of which, to me, they're really positive. I started thinking more about the society. I started wondering how could I help society more in my own ways, and then it just made me more positive towards the people who are less privileged." (CSP Participant)

Without a doubt, students reported a shift in their perspective of the world around them, their attitude to others, and the ways in which they understood and contextualized their experiences. They demonstrated shifts in perspective, attitude, and ways of knowing and understanding as a result of taking part in the CSP.

Global Citizenship: The Case for GSL Impact on Global Citizenship

As educators, how can we use service learning to "teach" global citizenship, and more specifically how can we use GSL to achieve this goal?

Research on GSL suggests that GSL programs have the ability to support the development of characteristics of responsible and active global citizenship (Annette, 2002; Kiely & Kiely, 2006; Plater, et.al., 2009). One of the primary goals of service learning in general is to provide real-life experiences which will promote respectful relationships between the servers and the served while also developing participant understanding of the economic, political, and social context of the host community. This understanding provides the foundation for the development of characteristics of global citizenship which, according to Oxfam (2016), include: the ability to confront stereotypes, ignorance, and intolerance; an awareness of the social systems which perpetuate inequality; and an ability to respectfully learn from others while recognizing our responsibility to one another.

Reflecting on this research, there is no question that the CSP experience helped to develop or strengthen these characteristics for students. Participants developed a sense of social responsibility and citizenship, and cultural understanding. This led to heightened levels of feeling globally connected, a more positive view of others in the world, and, as Participant S put it, a sense of being a *citizen of the world*, and thus having a responsibility for the wellbeing of others.

The participants' also demonstrated their ability to shift perspectives, attitudes, and ways of knowing through critically analyzing complex issues. They spoke about an increased ability to show tolerance, open-mindedness and empathy – all necessary components of global citizenship. They reported this shift happening as a result of engaging in lessons, discussions, activities, and reflections which targeted social, political, and historical context. This enabled them to contrast and compare structure and consequences of social and political systems of their home country to that of others, and evaluate the relationship of global and national structures and policies to poverty and inequality.

Participants demonstrated through their questions and comments around gender roles, indigenous cultures, civic identity, cultural conflict, and the ways in which national and global structures can reinforce inequality. These findings support research defending GSL as useful in developing skills which allow service learning students to become active local and global citizens (Bamber & Hankin,

2011; Hartman, 2009; Kiely, 2005; Longo & Saltmarsh, 2011; Larsen, 2014), and add substance to the

impacts of GSL as being a potent pathway to the development of global citizenship in adolescents,

specifically. In the following section, CSP participant impacts will be paired with ethical considerations

and the literature on global citizenship to offer GSL curricular recommendations for adolescent

programs.

GSL Curricular Recommendations

The central task of a GSL educator is to ensure the safety, wellbeing, and positive growth of

participants while following the humanitarian principle of *doing no harm* in the host community and

hopefully offering sustainable, ethical assistance. Therefore, for successful programming which meet

specified goals, it is critical to effectively balance host, itinerary, and project needs with the ideal level of

challenge for optimal positive participant impact (Eyler, 2011; Nickols, et.al., 2013).

"Establish[ing] a relationship of equality among the various parties, lead[s] to a more authentic

understanding of the community, and ultimately create[s] the foundation for adopting the most

effective strategies for providing help" (Arenas, Bosworth, & Kwandayi, 2006, p. 35). Furthermore, GSL

participants will each face individual challenges before, during, after their global experience, and the

authors encourage GSL practitioners to plan in accordance for the likelihood of such roadblocks. Below

are a series of recommendations for GSL curricular design which emerge directly from the CSP

participants' perceived impacts, challenges, and experiences, and also address general concerns and

critiques of GSL programs.

1. Prepare for and manage participant challenges.

To manage challenges and encourage optimal impact and resiliency in **GSL** participants, it is important to

prepare for "personal and intra-group challenges" (Nickols, et.al., 2013). This is particularly important in

the context of adolescent programs, as many will be facing unfamiliar challenges (e.g. physical, social,

and emotional and mental) that occur outside of their usual support network.

2. Safety and personal care.

Programs should be designed to ensure participants have a strong sense of safety and self-care; are

given choices as to how to contribute physically and socially during service and cultural work; are

supported through pastoral care of the project leaders so that they feel safe discussing the variety of

issues that may arise; and are given regular opportunities to reflect and process their new experience.

3. Embed reflection.

Reflection is at the heart of service learning, as it allows students the opportunity to analyze and re-

construct their understandings. To allow for different styles of learning and varying experience with and

capacity for reflection, regular opportunities for targeted and varied reflection should be provided, including varying the mode (written, oral, artistic), topic (personal, social, political, e.t.c.), and environment (private reflection, group space, e.t.c.) in which the reflexive activities take place.

4. Encourage diversity.

Participants in this research regularly benefitted from the diversity of a multi-national team. One student explained, "I feel like it was a lot better than working with people from just one school, because you really got to know how they lived, as well, at home, cause you talk about what it's like in everyone's country and stuff and I thought it was really interesting" (Participant R). Recognizing that diversity across schools and nationalities is not possible, efforts could be made to diversify activities so that students who don't know each other as closely (different grades or social groups) can interact.

5. Build community.

All students in this research highlighted the importance of having a sense of family and community within the participants and with the community at large. Participants were more motivated to learn when they were connecting with others and creating community. They enjoyed unplanned casual or social time with the group and the locals, in which they said they learned especially about each other's cultures and home practices through conversation. Furthermore, building on individual and collective strengths is essential; CSP participants reported increased self-confidence through learning new skills, contributing, and knowing their efforts made a difference to the collective. Celebrating and reframing group dynamics in light of personal strengths that emerge will allow this to happen. Finally, community can flourish when everyone feels safe; safe to share their opinions, confident their basic needs will be met, and comfortable growing and showing vulnerability to a new group of people. Thus, fostering time for students to reflect privately, and together as a group provides a fertile ground for building community.

6. Meaningful service.

It appears that including a meaningful service component with ample opportunities for reflection impacts participants not only in the way they relate to each other in terms of group dynamics, but also in the way they relate to the culture, ways of living, and environmental context of the service project itself. But what makes meaningful service, from a participants' point of view? As the ability to critically analyze complex issues is an important aspect of developing global citizenship, participants should be provided an opportunity to learn about the background information behind the project, including community characteristics, historical context, and current social, political, and economic considerations. In addition to finding the tangible results of the service project and the idea they could make a

difference motivating. This speaks to the importance of project selection and design; as the outcomes of many development projects are much less tangible, it is recommended to take this into consideration when selecting the most impactful project for both participants and host community; if the participants can see the results of their work, it appears to have a more positive impact.

7. Nurture cultural understanding.

All participants in this CSP noted the value of learning with local community members. In particular they talked about the importance of informal conversations and the plethora of historical facts, locals' interpretation of the Cambodian context they gained. They also spoke about the importance of history and language lessons led by Cambodians. Further students had an increased desire to learn more about Cambodian culture, and a list of readings or group activity reading sessions would be an ideal addition to GSL curriculum, giving students an opportunity to integrate their understanding in a range of ways. Providing various cultural activities for the students to understand, experience, and derive meaning from proves to be a critical way to get them to engage with and understand the host culture. Furthermore, "GSL research should also study the processes through which students develop an appreciation of and respect for indigenous ways of knowing in an international setting" (Tonkin, 2011, p. 212). Because students learn in a variety of ways and because a key aspect of global citizenship is an informed point of view, providing a range of historical, religious, political, artistic, and social cultural activities is ideal. As discussed, participants took part in diverse activities including the temple visits, athletics, social games, language and history lesson, and arts based interpretation.

As discussed in the literature review, Keith (2005) calls for GSL to involve a respectful *listening of perspectives and histories*. The students derived an incredible amount of satisfaction, broadened their perspective, and developed empathetic connections when dealing one-on-one with Cambodians. Therefore, to promote this type of interaction, cultural activities will *directly involve* local hosts, including opportunities to formally and informally engage in the culture and learn from their local hosts, and every attempt should be made to ensure formal guides are well informed and open to discussion.

Though formal cultural activities are critical, it also became apparent that some of the most authentic moments of positive student impact came from unplanned interactions on the volleyball court and around mealtimes. Therefore, providing enough free time for sport, casual conversations, or social

games to spontaneously occur is ideal, as some may learn better without the restrictions of a formal

activity.[1]

8. Carefully consider environment and accommodation.

The environment plays an integral role in the participant's experience, and participants often spoke

about the open and environmentally friendly nature of the camp, and felt they developed a stronger

connection with the community due to their proximity living at the camp. They also highlighted that the

close proximity of living together helped to generate a sense of community and impacted group

dynamics and increased sense of care for one another. Thus, careful consideration of the environment

and how it will impact the participants in terms of group dynamics, personal care, cultural

understanding, and opportunity for reflection is essential.

9. Intentional engagement with the outside world.

In general, participants appreciated having technology removed from the experience, though they found

it challenging at times (mostly at the beginning or when they weren't feeling well and wanted to

connect with home). "I found just being away from technology and being away from other people who

don't understand the experience was really important" (Participant W) Participants reported feeling

more present, calmer, and more connected to those they were sharing this experience with due to their

lack of connection with the *outside world*. Thus, it is encouraged to provide at least some time for

participants to be away from their usual influences, to *unplug* in order to provide a better chance to *plug

in* with the environment and people around them. Furthermore, GSL students can suffer from reverse

culture shock when returning home. Thus, it is encouraged to facilitate ongoing peer support (e.g.,

online forum) and to provide students the opportunity to prepare for the re-integration process.

10. Foster interdependence and do no harm.

To nurture ethical community engagement, it is important that ISL programs work in collaboration with

host communities to target identified needs (Grusky, 2000; Mitchell, 2008). As discussed earlier,

humanitarian development projects should involve a full assessment of the social, political,

environmental, and economic aspects of the project from the lens of *do no harm (Anderson, 1999).*

Thus, designing quality ISL programs demands thoughtful communication, preparation, and continuous

assessment of the project goals and outcomes between all stakeholders, and requires "recognizing the

knowledge of (and in) the community by insuring community input is reflected in the curriculum"

(Mitchell, 2008, p. 58). Furthermore, ISL programs should nurture a sense of interdependence which

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[1] Students said they were more likely to ask questions when chatting away at the dinner table, while learning a new skill on the work site, or in the down time around a game of cards or cup of tea, rather than during formal question and answer periods at the end of a tour guide or lesson.

"suggests a paradigm of continued support, long-term presence, an understanding that both parties are empowered to learn from each other, and, finally, the idea that the world's problems, although they occur in different geographical locations, are ultimately shared by all. (Dear, 2012, p. 120)

11. Ground GSL programs in research.

GSL educators and researchers continue to refine the conceptual and theoretical frameworks relevant to ISL and better understand the transformative effects of these programs on both host community and participants (Hartman & Kiely, 2014b). Therefore, in order to support the creation and delivery of more ethical and impactful GSL programs, every step of the program development process – from participant selection to project collaboration – must be grounded in the context of current research in the field.

12. Assess goals and impact of GSL programs.

No educational program can continuously define and meet determined goals without regular assessment. This is especially true for GSL programs; and when you are dealing with educating young people on how to interact with others and be in the world in a quickly changing global context, the dangers of reinforcing stereotypes and North-South divisions in GSL programming are too great (Grusky, 2000). Thus, I echo the call of Pickeral, et.al. (2008) and reinforce that quality partnerships, curriculum development, assessment, and leadership (including professional development) are essential aspects in guiding ethical GSL programming.

13. Continue research in ISL. As noted previously, there is considerable research needed in the field of ISL, and for adolescent participants more broadly. How do ISL programs differ for secondary and post-secondary school participants in terms of program needs, challenges, and impacts; and how can ISL programs best support adolescent participants to be global citizens? Does the composition and diversity of a group impact or affect the learning, and if so how? Additionally, how could more longitudinal studies be conducted to assess the long-term impact, influence, or transformation of ISL on adolescent participants? How can educators be best prepared to guide adolescent ISL experiences? These are only some questions to explore, and as ISL programs targeted at adolescent participants continue to grow, likely many more warrant further consideration and discussion to strengthen ISL programs in practice.