

Can Our Service Change Us? Bringing the Classroom to Service Learning in the Southern African Kingdom of Lesotho

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Abstract

Based on a decade's worth of service-learning trips to Lesotho, this paper focuses on the role of nightly discussion sessions in achieving our learning goals. It also examines how we carried out our community-service projects in conjunction with class material to help students move past negative stereotypes and objectification of the Basotho (an ethnic group whose ancestors have lived in southern Africa since around the fifth century) toward a greater understanding of the Basotho as people. During our community service, students often expressed feelings of pity for the Basotho as well as a sense of frustration at why they do not do more to help themselves. This paper will also address how the trip helps students move from feelings of pity to that of empathy, as well as creating an environment that helps break down the barriers between those performing community service and the communities they are working with.

Introduction

Whether domestic or abroad, service-learning trips are designed to benefit underserved communities, contribute to the education of our students, create understanding, and, ideally, produce a lifelong commitment to service as a result of the experience. As these kinds of trips often expose students to different communities and cultures, as well as extreme poverty, they have a significant potential to fail to achieve their goals and instead end up reinforcing negative stereotypes about impoverished communities. Given the many preconceived notions that students have about Africa upon entering college, one might expect these challenges to be especially daunting. However, with that risk also comes a significant potential to have a profound and life-changing impact on the intellect and emotions of students. Although our trip was to one of the poorest countries in the world, this paper seeks to discuss how we navigated the potential pitfalls and maximized student growth in a manner that will benefit those leading trips both in the United States and abroad.

The impetus behind the program was born

out of my experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Lesotho from 1989–1991, my Fulbright experience there from 1995–1996, and my continued professional and academic work in Lesotho. My particular interest in service started as an undergraduate at Kenyon College and continued through my work with Habitat for Humanity over a period of 20 years. During a visit to Lesotho in 2001, I participated in discussions with executives from Habitat for Humanity about their starting work in Lesotho. It was out of this conversation that I first conceived of a service trip to Lesotho. Returning to Wittenberg University the following fall, I broached the idea of a service trip to Lesotho with several members of the student Habitat for Humanity club. In many regards, it was their enthusiastic response that led to the very first trip in 2003. Since then, as part of 10 different trips, we have taken over 330 students from Wittenberg University on a month long service-learning trip to the Southern African Kingdom of Lesotho. In 2003, we took all 22 students that applied to participate in the program. However, as the demand for the program grew, eventually reaching 130 in 2011, we began to require that

students submit both a faculty recommendation letter as well as a personal statement. In deciding which students to select, we give the personal statement tremendous weight, while little attention is paid to GPA. In reflecting on applications over the years, we have come to feel that GPA is not the best indicator of which students will benefit most from this experience, whereas the authors can point to numerous weaker students who became much more engaged after participating in this program. We further look for students who express a willingness to come out of their comfort zones, while shying away from those who want “to save those poor starving Africans,” because they tend to be more resistant to the core values of the program.

In an effort to better facilitate and expand student learning, the nature of our projects have evolved over time. Initially we spent much of our time assisting Habitat for Humanity in building homes for female-headed households and community service at an orphanage in the capital city, Maseru. However, over time as different non-governmental organizations in Lesotho approached us and we began to develop new contacts, the nature of our service gradually changed during the third and fourth trips, in 2006 and 2008, as we began to focus on projects such as building houses, community centers, greenhouses, and chicken coops as well as planting fruit trees and digging gardens, designing classrooms, and building playgrounds. All of these projects are with local partners and are designed to help vulnerable children, especially orphans and HIV positive children. Focusing on our nightly discussion sessions, this paper will explore the way we manage each project in relation to student learning and will discuss student responses to their participation in different projects. Furthermore, this paper will seek to elucidate the questions and emotions generated by different types of projects and how students measure the perceived impact of our projects.

Our experience in developing a service-learning program may be of more benefit to faculty from fields not traditionally associated with service learning, as well as for faculty who are not well versed in the literature. The alterations made to our program were often based upon observation and discussion among the authors. The leaders of the program evaluate its successes and problems on a yearly basis in response to observations about an ever-changing student

body as well as the changing dynamics of service in Lesotho. In many aspects, the changes are similar to ones that are made in the classroom when evaluating the success or failure of certain assignments. Furthermore, our nightly discussion sessions provide daily student feedback, which helps shape the ever-changing nature of this program. Lastly, the rationale behind the nightly discussion sessions stems from the author's own teaching style.

Historical Background

The current borders of Lesotho were established in 1868 when the British Empire extended protection to the Basotho and prevented them from becoming part of South Africa. Since then, Lesotho remains only one of two countries in the world entirely surrounded by another (the other is Vatican City). Although Lesotho was a separate nation, under colonial rule it was managed in such a way that the Basotho people became dependent on migrant labor in the South African gold fields for their survival. By 1977, nearly 130,000 Basotho men worked in South African mines, and their remittances constituted nearly half of the nation's GNP (Rosenberg & Weisfelder, 2014). For young Basotho men, working in the mines became a right of passage, and part of the transition into manhood. While at the mines, Basotho men often engaged in *likota*, an unbecoming type of behavior toward women (Maloka, 2004), which included having multiple girlfriends and frequenting prostitutes. By the 1980s it had become a common and accepted part of mining culture that men cheated on their wives and girlfriends with women living near the mines. In 1984 the first case of HIV/AIDS was reported in the South African gold mines, and it would not be long before Basotho miners brought the disease home. By 1990 there were already 5,500 people living with HIV/AIDS in Lesotho. By the end of the decade, it would be estimated that 25% of adults (15–49) were positive, and that over 20,000 children had contracted the disease from their mother. During the first decade of the 21st century, Lesotho would suffer from the third highest per capita death rate from HIV/AIDS of any nation in the world. As it was mostly young adults dying from the disease, Lesotho, a nation of 2 million people, would have over 160,000 orphans by 2011 (Rosenberg & Weisfelder, 2014).

Lesotho's economic situation became significantly worse after the ending of apartheid in 1991. During the last decade of the 20th century the South African government made a concerted effort

to hire more black South Africans, which came at the expense of Basotho miners. In less than a decade the number of Basotho men working in the gold mines dropped from over 130,000 to its current level of about 54,000. Since then, the only jobs that have become available are low paying jobs for women at local textile factories. Faced with massive unemployment and land that can barely produce 11% of the country's food requirements, Lesotho is currently facing serious challenges to its survival. Last year the government announced that over 500,000 children were facing severe malnutrition and stunting if immediate food aid was not delivered (Rosenberg & Weisfelder, 2014). Additionally the ending of apartheid witnessed a massive exodus of foreign aid as many donors moved to South Africa. In the words of one government official: "Lesotho became out of sight and out of mind to the donor community." Although Lesotho was initially chosen as the destination for Wittenberg University's service trip because of my familiarity with the country, the plight of children in Lesotho also attracted students to the program.

Reflection and Confronting Stereotypes

One of the challenges of a service trip designed to help those who are economically disadvantaged in a given region or African nation, is that students often make judgments about the larger group of racial or regionally related people, thus reinforcing stereotypes. These beliefs can also be a product of students trying to help manage their own guilt or frustration at the situation and consequently they end up dehumanizing the individuals they are trying to help. Being exposed to some of the poorest people on earth in Lesotho can reinforce preconceived notions about Africans. As students struggle to come to terms with the poverty before them, some find it easier at first to blame Africans for not working hard enough while others conclude that Africans are content with their current living standards. The purpose for our nightly discussion sessions is to help students process their thoughts, feelings, and emotions on a daily basis as part of a larger group.

One of the most effective mediums we have found to facilitate student learning is our nightly reflection sessions. Usually held between 5 and 6 p.m., these sessions provide students an opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification on things they saw or witnessed, but more importantly they provide students with a forum to reflect and process their experiences in the

moment. Our philosophy throughout the entire trip, but especially during reflections sessions is to try and not force students to come to any specific conclusion or set of beliefs. During these meetings we see our role as that of facilitator and mediator, as well as providing factual information and or contextualizing certain experiences. The idea of playing the role of mediator and facilitator is partially based on the Sesotho concept of the *Morena*, which the British translated as *chief*, but whose main functions for the community more closely resembled that of a negotiator and facilitator during public forums known as *pitsos* (Rosenberg, 2008). However, although we provide guidance, we try to avoid directing the conversation, and refrain from telling the students how they should interpret or feel about a certain situation. Our approach to the reflection sessions is based on the Socratic method of teaching that I employ in the classroom. However, instead of providing a forum for students to discuss a reading or lecture, we will usually start the session by bringing up one or two instances that occurred during the day, after which we allow students the opportunity to provide the topics for discussion. We create an experience, and allow students to engage with it at their own level and reach their own conclusions.

Staying on top of students' emotions is important so that the experience does not become so overwhelming that they shut down or withdraw. Furthermore, the projects and lectures are laid out in a fashion that should keep the conversation always moving forward. Although there is often repetition, in general the nightly discussions tend to build on each other more than hash over the same ideas. We usually start by having all of the students meet together as one large group (this is often 35–38 students and 2 facilitators) so that they can hear more perspectives as well as bond together as a group. We think that it is important that students hear as many other voices as possible during the first half of the trip to help them process their experiences. During most trips we notice that there is often a group of students who do not speak during meetings; this is often the result of their being intimidated by the large group. Thus usually near the start of the third week we will break out into three or four smaller groups, each led by a trip leader. This allows quieter students to participate, but it also allows for deeper and more personal discussions. It is our belief that these smaller discussion groups might not be as effective early in the trip because the students who come from all

aspects of campus life might not yet be comfortable enough with each other to share some of their more personal feelings.

By discussing their experiences with their peers students are able to release many of the anxieties they are experiencing as well as many of the negative responses they may be harboring internally, and are gradually able to put their experiences within a larger framework as well as to begin to understand the lives of other people without judging them. Our students learn to become critical thinkers, gaining a deeper understanding of the realities that the people in Lesotho face, all the while gaining a greater understanding of our common bonds.

We have noticed over the years that most groups struggle with similar sets of issues (guilt, pity, frustration, and resentment) and often tend to objectify the Basotho during our discussions. Thus, service has the potential to reinforce many negative stereotypes about Africans and poor people. One of the ways we help students see the Basotho as human beings and help them move past preconceived notions is by helping them navigate the difference between pity and empathy, by moving away from the initial feelings of being sorry for “those” poor people, toward a sense of empathy and understanding of the daily obstacles that many Basotho face. It has been our experience that in the early stages of the program students tend to objectify the Basotho and verbalize feelings of pity. However, as the trip progresses we hear the dehumanizing objectification gradually replaced with a sense of shared humanity and empathy towards the Basotho (not all students reach this at the same time, but we have observed that as a group they reach certain intellectual markers at the same time). Students’ frustration and resentment often manifests itself in phrases like “why don’t they (the people of Lesotho) do more to help themselves?” In response to this we challenge students to think about who “they” are (and that referring to the Basotho as “they” objectifies them as all being the same) and to take into account larger socio-economic factors that have shaped Southern Africa.

Students often note that the Basotho seem happy, and thus conclude that the Basotho are either happy being poor or are unaware that they are poor. We try to confront this objectification of the Basotho by explaining that the Basotho are aware that they are poor, and try to gently lead our students towards the idea of how we are projecting our own perceptions as well as discussing the correlation between poverty and happiness. It is

our hope that students will come to understand that poor people can be happy, with the understanding that happiness does not derive from their being unaware or from being unencumbered by material goods. We try to help the students appreciate the value of their service while simultaneously guiding them to move beyond the “I helped save poor orphans,” or “I am so thankful for what I have,” interpretations of their experience, and to become more understanding, compassionate, and empathetic people with a greater appreciation of the realities faced by people living in another country. It is our belief that these discussions help students learn, and help create “a life-changing” experience through community service.

Learning from Service

During our service-learning trip to Lesotho, we try to avoid creating an experience that resembles academic or service tourism by removing the barriers between the Basotho and us. Although we are in Lesotho for a month, there is a potential to build artificial barriers between our students and the people of Lesotho, barriers that would make us tourists who happen to be doing community service. Driving in our private buses to and from a worksite, working by ourselves on given projects could put up walls between us and the Basotho, and turn the Basotho people into objects on display for us to view. To avoid such outcomes, we have developed a number of mechanisms in the trip from working with local communities, partnering with local youth groups, and organized activities designed to help students engage one on one with the local population.

Importance of Local Partners

Since the first trip in 2003 we have partnered with the Lesotho Youth Work Camp Association, which provides several local volunteers who are of similar age to our students. The initial reason behind the partnership was to add a distinct element to our cross-cultural experience. We felt that by working with people their own age, who share similar experiences as young adults, such as taste in music and clothes that American students would come to see their similarities with people living in Lesotho. The nature of our construction projects coupled with a lack of skills and written directions forces the two groups to have to communicate in order to complete the projects. There is often significant down time at the worksites and this provides further opportunities for the groups to

interact. As our groups often tend to outnumber the Basotho volunteers 5 to 1, only a handful of our students were actually getting to know the Basotho volunteers. Furthermore, I am sure that our large group presented a challenge for our Basotho hosts. However, over the years, as the same Work Camp volunteers showed up, they began to be more comfortable with our students, and the leader of the group became an excellent mediator and facilitator of group interactions. Our students benefited greatly when the Work Camp volunteers joined us on all the projects because it allowed students to develop genuine friendships with the Basotho. As the students and Work Camp volunteers begin to discover shared tastes in music and clothing, as well as issues of 'dating' they began to see their counterparts as peers and not as "Africans." In one particular case, the walls were broken when one of my students introduced feminine hygiene products and instructed her new Basotho friend on their proper use. As they began to see them as friends, it began to change the way they viewed the Basotho. The participation of the Work Camp was one of the more successful approaches to helping students see the Basotho as people.

Service Time and Learning

Since the inception of the Lesotho Field Experience in 2003 it has always been a service-learning trip, however, over time both the projects have changed as have the connection between the community service and more traditional academic components. During the 2003 and 2005 programs nearly half our time was spent digging pit latrines for Habitat for Humanity, which allowed the skilled builders to focus on building the houses. Over time, we gradually transitioned to building greenhouses, chicken-coops, piggeries, gardens, and orchards, as well as painting classrooms and building playgrounds for organizations that work with orphans and HIV positive children. The changing emphasis of our projects in Lesotho was done because of the desperate need in Lesotho, but also to create a more powerful experience for the Wittenberg students. These new projects also confronted us with new learning challenges, especially in regards to how to maximize the learning potential. Over the next few years, we learned to be more deliberate in the order of the projects that we undertook while in Lesotho. We discovered that certain projects answered more questions early in the trip, while other projects drew greater meaning if done later. We also noticed

that the amount of time spent at a given site had consequences for student learning. As many of our projects involved difficult physical labor, we noticed that working on one project for several days led to not only physical exhaustion, but could also start to generate negative feelings towards the project and the Basotho. In response to this, we tried spending less time on any given project, working at a site for only 2-3 days and then moving on. However, these short stays left students feeling disconnected from the project and without a sense of accomplishment or any real connection to the Basotho at that location. The limited time frame did not allow students to develop personal connections with the Basotho they were working with or helping, producing a more superficial experience, which further contributed to the objectification of the Basotho. The model that seems to work best for us, and keep students invested in the project is one week at a given site with a day off in the middle (this is usually used for lectures or some cross-cultural activity). We have found that this balance provides enough time for students to feel invested in the project as well as being able to develop personal connections with our local hosts while avoiding burnout and the subsequent resentment that it seems to generate.

In 2008 we had the problem of students not feeling connected to the projects due to our shorter stays at any given project and thus in response in 2009 developed a model of 5 days at a project with a day off for cross-cultural and academic activities in the middle, in order to not burn out students and to give them time to feel more connected to their projects. However, in 2009 we ran two consecutive trips, and thus group one started many projects that would be completed by group two. Not seeing projects through to their completion led to similar feelings of being unfulfilled like those expressed by students who had spent only 2-3 days on a given project.

Back in 2008, four orphans between the ages of 17-19 approached me for help; they said they were inspired by the community center we were building and that they wanted to do something to help their community. After hearing their business plan, we gave them about \$200 without high hopes for success. Our lack of confidence was driven by our belief that handouts rarely work. However, by the time we returned in 2009 the four young men had established a thriving chicken business and were selling almost 800 chickens a year. We shared this story with our students on the 2009

trip and had them meet the young men. It was at this time that we came up with the idea that with our community service “we are planting seeds,” and that although you may not see them grow to maturity that is the reality of doing community service in Lesotho. The concept seemed to help many students process their frustration and move towards a more accepting place.

The idea of planting a seed allowed students the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their work in a new way and helped remove the American need to see instant results. Also, as they began to understand the difficulties that many projects face after we leave, the planting a seed concept also helped remove resentment and possible frustration that their work may not succeed. Framing our work in terms of seeds, some of which have failed as well as those that have blossomed, helps students conceptualize the diversity of the Basotho and the realities they face. Seeing that some projects survive while others fail teaches us not to lump all of the Basotho together, but rather to consider every project as distinct and separate as are the people who we are working with on any given site. Inside one of the community centers we built, the students decided to paint the phrase “planting seeds,” and then made drawings on the wall illustrating their growth over time. The painting serves multiple purposes as it generates an element of hope for both our students as well as for the Basotho. The illustration shows that change is constant, and like the growth of seeds, it is often a slow process that must be given time to come to fruition. Although the failure rate may be much higher in Lesotho, this dichotomy allows students to identify more with Lesotho and its people.

Selecting the Right Projects to Facilitate Learning Goals

During our 2006 trip, which was the first to involve more direct projects designed to help orphans, and HIV positive children, and also led to greater interaction with the Basotho, we noticed that many of the students were vocalizing their frustration with the Basotho and why they did not do more things to help themselves. This resentment continued to fester during our 2008 program when students saw that one of the projects undertaken in 2006 had not been well maintained. We tried to explain the economic and technical problems that confront Lesotho, and the challenges faced by the Basotho, which cause so many projects to fail. We still felt that our explanations were not achieving our goals as many students continued to harbor

frustration and resentment. As a result we sought to find a more effective approach to alleviate this problem in future trips. Since 2009, our first project has involved building one or two houses for orphan headed households. Often the first task we have to undertake is to carry thousands of cinder blocks that have been left by the side of the road to the location where the house is being built. Now when asked during the early days of our trip “why don’t the Basotho do more to help themselves,” or those who think that it should be easy to fix Lesotho’s problems, we ask them to talk about what they did today. Students often start with something like “we carried blocks up a hill,” to which we reply, “why did we do that?” Students begin to realize what they know would be done by machines in minutes in the United States is done by hand in Lesotho and often takes days. As they carry those blocks up hill the following day (and it is always uphill), it is my hope that they develop a greater sense of the challenges faced by the Basotho in getting things done. Other students have commented on the arduous process of flattening the floor prior to the pouring of concrete, and what took several students days could have been done by a machine in minutes at home. Working under local conditions helps students understand that the Basotho are not lazy, and that getting things accomplished in Africa is not the same as completing them in the United States. Hopefully, by walking up the hill, the students begin to experience the challenges faced from the perspective of the Basotho, and gain a greater empathy for their circumstances.

During our second week we tend to undertake projects at orphanages that are designed to generate self-sufficiency through food production (greenhouses, chicken-coops, fruit trees). By moving from houses for two families to orphanages that house anywhere from 30–50 children, students are gradually exposed to the scope of the problem in Lesotho. Even though many of the children living in orphanages are better fed and clothed than those in the village, the experience of working in an orphanage is a very powerful one for most students. One of the more challenging emotions that we are confronted with is feeling pity for the Basotho. One of the points made in our pre-trip meetings is that students are not allowed to bring candy to give to the children. However, once we arrive in Lesotho and they see the children, many of whom are asking for candy, students feel a strong impulse to hand out candy the children. Beyond explaining that candy will not solve malnutrition, nor make

a significant impact, it is the emotion behind the action that is most important. Students are often driven by pity for what they see as thin, poorly clothed children. In most cases the desire to hand out candy is done in an attempt to assuage their own guilt at seeing the children as well as providing a momentary relief from that feeling through the smile on a child's face after receiving candy. The act of handing out candy helps remove guilt in the moment, but does virtually no long term good for the student or the child. It helps neither achieve their long-term goals, nor does it actually bring the two parties closer together. If anything, the act of handing out candy builds up even greater walls, as the relationship is now defined by the act of giving out of remorse, undermining any chance to develop a relationship as equals. Under apartheid, white South Africans would occasionally drive through the Lesotho countryside on holiday and throw candy out the window to the children. Witnessing this myself during my time in the Peace Corps, I remember feeling anger at the tourists' actions because it resembled throwing peanuts at the zoo. When I explain that the tourists often saw the children as faceless animals that came running for candy, students began to reflect on their own desire to hand out candy. We begin to discuss how pity does not help the Basotho, but also how it also objectifies them.

Breaking Down Barriers

One of the challenges doing service in Africa, and perhaps in other communities, is that students tend to lump together all of the people from that area. In our case, students often assume that all Basotho are poor and in need of help. One of the ways that this tends to manifest itself during our nightly discussions is that students tend to say "they" when talking about the people of Lesotho, or about a given issue in the country. This is both a product of our pre-trip lectures, which generalize the problem in Lesotho and are compounded by the fact that most of the people we are working with are in need. Usually after this has happened a few times we will ask who are we talking about when we say "they" or "them"? We try and challenge students not to lump all Basotho together, because that fails to acknowledge the diversity of people living in Lesotho (they are all not poor, orphans, or HIV positive) and removing the individual element, in turn, is an act of dehumanization. We try and frame the issues confronting the country as a whole, yet not each and every individual will suffer from the

same afflictions, as each person is an individual with their own history and worth. Helping students see that not all Basotho can be lumped together, (there are different classes and groups of people, and that while most Basotho are poor, and many are HIV positive, not all Basotho suffer from these afflictions) opens the door allowing us to see the Basotho as human beings. And once they see them as human beings, it also allows for deeper and more meaningful connections to be made, because we move beyond the poor starving African stereotype seen in infomercials.

What Do People in Need Look Like?

The dichotomy of personal situations in Lesotho allows students to see that the problems that exist in Lesotho tend to be the same problems that we have back home. At some point during our meetings the conversation will turn towards the city of Springfield, Ohio where Wittenberg is located. Students will begin to discuss some the challenges faced by Springfield, such as childhood hunger and poverty, which are similar to what they are encountering in Lesotho. They often acknowledge that they tend to distance themselves from seeing the poverty at home, and often view poor people in their community in "us" and "them" terms. They are more open and driven to help those impoverished in Africa, because it is seen as more exotic and fits our cultural norms. Furthermore, because African poverty is so removed it does not threaten them or their notions of the United States. Yet, being confronted with African poverty in many cases allows students to see the poverty around them at home and motivates many of them into volunteer work once they return.

Almost every group we have taken has commented on how happy the Basotho are, in part as a result of the reception that we receive every time we are in the village. In recent years, a significant number of students have sought to try and figure out how and why the Basotho are happy. As mentioned above, the Basotho are often seen as poor (and in most cases those in the villages tend to be, and the living conditions make this evident), and thus the students have a more difficult time understanding how they can be happy living in what they view as impoverished conditions. This view of the Basotho as all being impoverished is reinforced by the very nature of our program as well as the rural community in which we stay. As many Basotho are seen smiling or laughing, or are just very welcoming to our students, a conclusion

that has recently been voiced in our discussions is that they are happy because they are poor. When asked to elaborate, we tend to receive responses such as “they are not burdened with the same material desires as us,” “or they have simpler lives not complicated by modernity and are thus happy,” or that the Basotho are simply “unaware that they are poor.” What we seemed to notice is that often poverty or ignorance of the outside world was being equated as the reason for happiness. The notion that the Basotho are happy because they are poor is an example of the dehumanization that can take place on a trip such as ours. To help students revisit this, we tend to help them understand that many Basotho are keenly aware that they are poor, and regardless of their poverty they are well aware of all of the material and consumer goods available in this world. We also feel compelled to make clear that virtually nobody is happy because they are poor. Thus, once the ignorance argument is removed, students are forced to grapple with the idea that some people know they are poor, know they don’t have things, and yet still manage to be happy. Moving the discussion to the next level, students are once again placed in a position in which they can stop objectifying the Basotho and begin see them as human beings, and that a human being does not entirely define themselves and all their actions by wealth. Furthermore, just because we are greeted by smiling Basotho where ever we go does not mean that all Basotho are happy all the time. We hope that through discussion and cross-cultural interactions they can begin to see the Basotho as people, people who can be both happy and sad depending on their given situation and individual feelings. This allows us to reach a point in our discussion where we can discuss the notion that the Basotho can be happy even if they are poor as one’s economic status does not define them as human beings.

Why Don’t They Help Themselves?

During the trip the causes and consequences of poverty are a frequent topic.

As discussed earlier, students often assume that all Basotho are poor, and many think poverty in Lesotho is product of Basotho culture or a lack of a strong work ethic. Students understand poverty, but rarely the structural conditions behind it; they can pity poor people, but not really understand them. As a result, students have a tendency to see the Basotho as authors of their own misfortune, and conclude that poverty has created a culture in which the Basotho have stopped trying. This

interpretation in many ways resembles the “Culture of Poverty” argument put forth by American academics in the 1960s in an effort to explain urban poverty. (Lewis, 1968) In many respects, the nature of Lesotho being surrounded by South Africa resembles that of the inner city in the United States. Furthermore, the economic relationship between Lesotho serving as a labor reserve for South Africa and the chronic unemployment of the inner cities creates similar conditions. In general, the Basotho are not authors of their own poverty because they are lazy; rather they have adjusted their expectations to meet the economic realities of Lesotho, which can be perceived as being lazy. However, as Massey and Denton (1993) note in their discussion of the “culture of segregation,” it is the larger economic and social context that shapes behavior. Since the loss of access to jobs in South Africa, the reality in Lesotho is that the overwhelming majority of people will never find stable wage employment because there are simply no jobs available, which creates the perception that they are not trying to find work. Furthermore when students see empty fields as we drive to and from the worksites they cannot fathom why the Basotho simply do not farm. It is not until they become aware of the full range of obstacles that impede agriculture in Lesotho can they grasp the futility of trying to support oneself off the land and thus begin to have a deeper understanding of the economic behavior of many Basotho.

During our time in Lesotho we visited a textile factory owned by Chinese companies. As a result of the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA), passed in 1998 (and renewed twice since), which allows African-made textiles to enter the United States duty free in an attempt to jump start industrial development, Lesotho has become one of the larger exporters of denim to the United States, exporting nearly \$500 million worth in 2007. However, rather than advancing African industry, all of the textile factories in Lesotho are foreign owned, mostly by Chinese and Taiwanese companies. What the Basotho get are low paying jobs on the factory floor, which pay less than \$1,000 dollars a year, require 60 hours a week, as well as forced overtime. In addition to seeing the environmental pollution, students tour a sweatshop first hand. After seeing the women standing in front of huge piles of jeans, on cardboard boxes to keep their bare feet warm on the concrete floor, many students gain a profound new insight into the nature and causes of poverty. Additionally, many of the stereotypes and assumptions about poor

people are removed through the humanization of workers in the factories. By seeing the women working in the factories, students are exposed to the fact that the Basotho are not lazy, but that the larger economic structure is designed to keep them that way. Usually the trip to the factory leads to a significant amount of anger and frustration with the situation. Generally, the conversation will drift towards what can be done. Some students raise the idea of boycotting jeans, which then raises the catch 22 of whether it is better to be exploited or starving. This allows students to imagine themselves in the position that many Basotho women find themselves in, which leads to empathy and understanding. We feel that this discussion brings the reality of Lesotho and its people home. Furthermore, the experience in the textile factory then helps students with the larger picture within which our service is conducted.

From Feelings of Resentment and Pity To Developing Empathy

A challenging situation that we encounter occurs at the compound where we stay as children from the village often gather at the gate waiting for the students. During our last few visits the children from the village will often be waiting at the gate the day we arrive, and almost immediately begin to engage the students. They play games, hold hands, braid hair, and just sit sometimes. In recent years, the children from the village have often begun to produce notes, asking a certain student to be their friend. In some cases, the children have fought over various students, claiming the student as their friend. Usually by the second or third week many of the children, begin to ask for gifts, either: money, school fees, or material possessions. For some students these requests can reinforce the desire to help a child by giving into the request, while others feel that they are being used. Both of these responses can create walls between our students and the community as well as reinforcing many of the perspectives that contribute to the objectification of the Basotho. When asked what they should do, we do not have a blanket answer or dictate, but rather we engage in a broader discussion regarding the complexity of personal relationships and expectations. Many students initially feel compelled to give something because they are driven by a sense of guilt and feel obligated to give something. Feelings of guilt and obligation often stem from students feeling sorry for the children at the gate. One of the questions we ask is

whether they want to give a gift to feel better about themselves or is the desire coming from a place of empathy, and based on a genuine relationship between the two. However, during the course of our discussions students began to move past feelings of pity and as they get to know different children personally, and their decision to leave a gift tends to be driven by empathy. We try to help students realize that they do not have to experience the depth of poverty or loss that a Basotho child may have faced in order to empathize with their position and to understand what that child may be facing. Removing the emotional walls allows students to start viewing children in Lesotho not as African children, but just as children.

A similar challenge was faced in 2009 when one of the community organizations we were working with asked us to help hand out food parcels and blankets in addition to planting fruit trees in the yards of fifty orphan headed households. Although I was uncomfortable with this request, we participated in handing out the items. Although our local partner had a representative from each family tell their story, I think in an effort to humanize them, the brevity of the stories coupled with the act of handing out items made students feel guilt and pity towards the families they came into contact with. As this was during the last week of the trip, most students had already begun to develop a sense of empathy and friendship with many Basotho at the time of this service, however without fully understanding the situation of each family, and not having developed any kind of relationship with those families, students felt very detached and frustrated by this experience. This suggests that most of our students were no longer driven by pity or guilt, but that rather they had come to see themselves as assisting out fellow people.

Prior to the trip many students expect to “save Africans,” and during our discussion sessions after completing a project or event students sometimes phrase their accomplishment in terms of having “saved” those we were working with. Without minimizing the accomplishments or the positive impact of our project, it is important that students discuss and realize that we are not “saviors,” and that a mural or playground, or even a greenhouse will not save the country, nor will it completely alter the lives of specific children. To think that our actions have the ability to “save” a country or a group is naïve, but it is also ignorant and condescending. We need to discuss the real impacts of our projects in terms of the realities in which real people live

in order to have a greater understanding of how things came to be and why they are the way they are today. The idea that our small contributions can truly “save” others makes ourselves more important than we are and minimize the hardships that the people we are working with face. The feeling of being a savior not only places us above those who we are working with, but it also reinforces the idea that they are somehow at fault for their present situation. If we seek to gain an understanding of others, and empathy for their situation then we need to place our actions within the proper context.

The initial feelings of pity and guilt often make students feel uncomfortable, and it is this discomfort that helps stimulate change that evolves into empathy. Change tends not to happen when people are comfortable, rather discomfort often acts as a catalyst or desire for things to be different. Being uncomfortable helps students reflect on their own motivations during the trip, and as they begin to develop personal relationships, the discomfort removes many of the walls that were in place when they arrived in Lesotho. As they seek to come to terms with powerful and difficult emotions as well as trying to reconcile the lives of the Basotho who they meet on a daily basis, many students will open up to the Basotho and make an effort to better understand them as people as well as the hardships they face.

One of the few activities that we undertake that does not involve construction or labor is a carnival that we hold at the Baylor Pediatric AIDS clinic in Maseru. Opened in 2005, by 2008 the clinic was treating over 3,000 HIV positive children free of charge. Although the long-term impact of the carnival is not as tangible as our other projects, we have felt that it is important to provide the children at the clinic, many of whom are very sick, and most are under 8 years old, with a fun day, hopefully one that they will remember the next time they visit the clinic. After a few failed carnivals that included food and gifts, which created chaos and a dynamic that we hoped to avoid, in recent years the carnival has not given away things but rather has focused on stations where children can use crayons and coloring books, get rub-on tattoos, play with bubbles, make bracelets, play with parachute and ball, as well as jump ropes and play soccer. Perhaps more than any particular activity, what many of the children seem to enjoy the most is being held or playing with the students. Despite the language barrier, the play and the smiles generated by the carnival are universal. One of the most amazing things to witness is the

transformation from a somber and quiet waiting room, to 80–100 children running around outside laughing and screaming. Almost all the students tend to get caught up in the moment and forget that these are sick children, but rather they become children wanting to play. Prior to our visit, we have a long conversation with students about the day, and the limitations of some of the children (as well as safety). As we start talking about the clinic, and HIV positive children, many of the students will begin to tear up, yet we encourage them not to cry while we are there, but rather to enjoy the moment and have as much fun as possible with the children. Despite the tears that are shed, the carnival helps remove many of the labels placed on HIV positive children and allows students to interact with them as they would any other child.

Prior to our visit, the students learn about the problem of HIV/AIDS from our pre-trip classes as well as from the guest lecturers and they have probably already helped build a house for an orphan family. Despite this, the reality of HIV/AIDS in Lesotho still seems a bit abstract or difficult to fully grasp until one is confronted with nearly 100 HIV positive children. Usually, the discussion session the night after we visit Baylor is one of the most emotional and powerful sessions we have. When students hear that there are 160,000 orphans in Lesotho, or that nearly 25% of the population is HIV positive or that over 8,000 children are born every year with the disease, they are often overwhelmed and tend to view them more as statistics than people. However, after spending a morning at Baylor, they are no longer faceless numbers, but students feel the humanity of the crisis for perhaps the first time. Beyond the tears and anger that many of them express, for the first time we have a meaningful discussion about the human reality of HIV in Lesotho. Having played with an HIV positive child often changes students’ perspectives, because when they are playing, they could be playing with any child, they laugh and run just like children at home. The carnival atmosphere helps students stop defining them as “HIV positive” or “HIV positive children.” The carnival humanizes the children at the clinic, and in doing so, we can move beyond viewing them as objects to be pitied, but rather as humans who we can empathize with. In turn, the experience at the carnival impacts our future projects working with orphans because we have learned to identify with those we are helping.

The Importance of Class Room Learning in Support of Service

After taking eight service-learning trips, in 2012 we tried a trip that was exclusively service, without guest lectures, or some of the cross-cultural activities that we implement as part of the more traditional academic component of the trip. During the first 8 trips we had 8–10 lectures from the local university (National University of Lesotho) and representatives from local NGOs come and speak on a variety of topics such as: gender, health, development, history, political science, education, HIV/AIDS, economics, religion, and culture. Often these lectures were timed to coincide with a certain work project that allowed students to view the reality of the topics being discussed. Some of our most engaging discussions came on the nights after lectures, as students were often able to make the connection between what they heard in the classroom and what they were seeing in the field. Sometimes they agreed with the speakers, and on other occasions they felt as though their experience and interpretation was different than that of the guest speaker. These were stimulating discussions, which allowed students to develop their own opinions. In addition to no lectures, the scavenger hunt that we usually have students participate in during or fifth day in Lesotho was also dropped. The scavenger hunt is designed to force students to engage with the Basotho without an instructor in order to help students become more confident in approaching the Basotho. Additionally, due to unforeseen circumstances the Work Camp was unable to join us. Without these cross-cultural and more traditional academic components, we believe that students had a more difficult time getting to know the Basotho as individuals.

In 2012 there were no guest lectures as part of the service trip, but during the course of our three-week trip, we did retain the nightly reflection sessions. However, it became evident by the second week that the discussions during this trip were not reaching the intellectual depth that previous trips had reached. Every trip is different and some reach greater intellectual depth than others, and almost every one of the previous trips had tended to focus more on one prominent issue. Yet, this group of discussions fell well short of any of the previous trips, and often left the leaders frustrated. In hindsight, we do not believe that it had anything to do with the given group of students, but rather without the academic and structured cross-cultural components, they did not learn as much from

the service, and the overall experience was not as powerful as previous programs. Previously, I had assumed that even without the traditional academic features, the service and discussions alone would be enough to generate a service-learning experience that generated deep thought and reflection on the part of students. Thus we learned that the traditional academic component including: readings, lectures, and cross-cultural activities are vital to transforming a service experience into a true service learning experience.

For many years we have encouraged students to read Jim Wooten's (2004) book *We Are All the Same* about Nkosi Johnson, a boy in South Africa who was born with HIV. Based upon that book title, and a comment made by one of the Basotho we worked with, near the end of the trip in 2008 some of the students took that as their motto and painted it onto the back of the community center we had built. More than a painting, for many students that phrase had come to symbolize the trip for them and what they had learned. Since then, future trips have seen the words on the back of the wall at the community center and have chosen to adorn many of their projects with those words. In many ways *We Are All the Same*, has become the motto of trip, and for many students it is one of the most powerful and lasting memories that they take away from the experience. During one of our pre-trip meetings I teach the students that in the Sesotho language there is no word for stranger. Afterward, we usually try and discuss the cultural significance of this and what it tells us about the Basotho. Hopefully, by the end of the trip, through the personal relationships they have made with individual Basotho they are fully able to grasp the true meaning of the phrase. Through the fulfillment of personal relationships made with the Basotho the goal of empathy and understanding emerges through the eyes and experiences of a personal connection. It is our hope, that through service we are not only able to help the Basotho, but that we can help our students come to the conclusion that regardless of skin color, socio-economic situation, or being HIV positive, that at some level as humans we are all the same, with the same basic feelings, wants, and humanity.

Conclusion

Trying to make sure that students do not finish the experience with resentment, preconceived stereotypes, or objectifying all the Basotho as poor and helpless is one of the greater challenges of this service experience. By working with the

Basotho, they come to understand the lives of individual people, people whom they can see as individuals, and for whom they can feel empathy. If we can help students move beyond those superficial interpretations, we hope that the meaning of the experience will be more profound and longer lasting. Those who grasp these concepts often go on to do volunteer work in their local communities or to join programs such as AmeriCorps, Teach for America, and the Peace Corps. However, in our final reflections it is not uncommon for students to state that what they are taking away from the experience is that they are thankful for what they have. While such sentiments may be noble, they are often superficial, and suggest that the individual is still stuck in the “other” and “us” paradigm that objectifies the Basotho. Because the goal is not to be thankful for what you have, but rather it is to understand what others have without seeing them as lesser or wanting, which is how we develop a genuine empathy and understanding. Lindsay Pepper as student on the 2009 program reflected that this trip taught her “how to feel.” This is an example of the kind of empathy we hope to generate during the program.

Over the last decade we have worked to develop a service-learning experience based on the belief that by taking students out of their comfort zone they are more receptive to overcoming prejudice and negative stereotypes and develop a greater sense of empathy on their own terms. During our nightly meetings we do not try and force students to come to certain conclusions or beliefs, and we do not preach to them, but rather we create an environment that allows each student to engage the experience on their own level and to reach their own conclusions. In order to accomplish our goals, we have carefully arranged our projects in conjunction with lectures and cross-cultural activities to help students see the humanity in the people they are working with and to develop a better understanding of the conditions and realities of those living in poverty. Although not all students reach these goals, our model has proven to be extremely successful.

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