

TRANSFORMING THE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS: MOVING BEYOND THE PRINCIPLE OF ACCOMPANIMENT

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Evidence exists that international learning experiences provide undergraduate and graduate students with opportunities to develop intercultural competence and global perspectives. This development is grounded in the idea of accompaniment that is prevalent in study abroad programs and international service experiences at the higher education level. Accompaniment is firmly planted in the idea of mutual relationships and sharing culture. However, it only creates a superficial understanding of the community and fails to address and implement systems of sustainable practice. This theoretical supposition challenges educators to go beyond the foundation of accompaniment and explore innovative practice that can benefit the development of intercultural competence in students and promote sustainability in the international contexts that these academic-based international service programs work with. The authors detail suggestions that educators can use as a framework for transforming international service experiences, their students, and the communities they serve.

Introduction

Research in the field of leadership richly addresses the ever-increasing awareness of societal globalization. Due to this increase of globalization, booming informational technology, international trade and technology, rise in market competition (Goldsmith, Greenberg, Robertson, & Hu-Chan, 2003), and the increase of diversity within domestic business environments (Jokinen, 2005), it has become

necessary to critically analyze our previous understandings of leadership. However, many successful business managers do not, for whatever reason, succeed in the global arena (Jokinen, 2005). Hence, leadership on an international scale must differ from the domestic. This creates a challenge that forces leadership educators to leap beyond the conventional wisdom and explore innovative means for preparing the next generation of globally competent leaders.

However, global competency development provides a complicated conundrum for leadership educators. When considering the varying obstacles facing leaders of the past versus the present context, we can conclude “while thinking globally may have been an *option* for the leaders of the past, it will be a *requirement* for the leaders of the future” (Goldsmith et al., 2003, p. 15). Throughout the examination of different models, characteristics, and theories of global leadership, it is important to remember its contextual component. Global leadership is different in varying countries because cultural norms, values, and beliefs vary as well (Morrison, 2000). Leadership models differ among countries, and generally these models are effective only when used among people within the same culture. This obviously poses an immediate problem for global leadership research, where cultural knowledge and context is essential. Jokinen (2005) suggested that although the need for global leadership has become quite obvious, the defining characteristics of those leaders have not.

To meet this challenge, many educators have turned to immersive experiences to develop global competence and intercultural perspectives in learners. And more specifically they have attempted to address this development through the idea of accompaniment, where both parties come together for mutual learning, understanding, and collaboration. Accompaniment implies “a commitment to walking with, rather than doing for” (Aaker, 1993, p. 70). Many researchers have concluded varying elements of success when working in acts of service and humanitarian aid with respect to the idea of accompaniment. Some would offer that accompaniment is not only effective, but also necessary. Darr suggested that “half of ‘giving back’ is ‘being there’” (Darr & Songer, 2010, p. 11).

However, when faced with the perspective of traveling to foreign soil and engaging in service work, students are often presented with a myriad of emotional and physical challenges that test their abilities to practice true accompaniment and, further, address and implement sustainable opportunities for the indigenous populations. This article explores that idea providing a framework for enhanced understanding of how to use accompaniment as a vehicle for the development of global competence and the precursor for fully engaging in the sustainable calling that our students and

universities are asked to answer in developing countries.

Theoretical & Conceptual Foundation

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GLOBAL LEADER

The development of the global leader involves the increase of global competence. Leaders should obtain a global mind-set (Moran & Riesenberger, 1994), where elements of equality, learning, understanding values and assumptions, appropriate motivation, and respect hold a large role. Included within these is the idea that global leadership is contextual, relational, ethical, and emotional. The contextual nature of global competence is critical (Baumgratz, 1995), as its definition is developed from the point of view of the opposing culture. Within immersive contexts, an understanding of the background of the individual, their age, gender, and education is essential to make ethical decisions (Morrison, 2001). Context is essential because it allows the individual to understand how to properly respond to and communicate with the individual (Puffer, 1990). Obtaining knowledge about the context can assist in more effective assessment of the context and the leadership opportunities within it. Jacobs, Harding, Mumford, and Zaccaro (2000) suggested that the most important factor of a global leader is knowledge—knowledge relating to business, the organization itself, its tasks, and the people it is impacting.

Black, Morrison, and Gregersen (1999) provided several global leadership characteristics, which include embracing duality by demonstrating effective knowledge of the other culture. The researchers interviewed over 130 business professionals within more than 50 international corporations, asking them to describe effective global leadership and how to attain it. The result was recognizing that the characteristics of the global leader are contextual, where seeking knowledge and asking questions are consistently needed.

Global leadership has also proved to be quite relational. Global competence is more than simply holding general knowledge of the culture, but is more centered on relational knowledge (Baumgratz, 1995). This type of knowledge involves the individual’s home

environment, their objective knowledge, and personal perception. A unique factor of Goldsmith and colleagues' (2003) vision of a global leader includes empowering others. For these researchers, global leadership includes shifting that leadership role by guiding others in order to allow them to lead themselves. This creates an open environment where communication and information is shared, there is an overall increase of knowledge and innovative thinking, and an effective team foundation is established.

Morrison (2001) linked ethics with global leadership, where the foundational "bedrock" of global leadership is integrity. With integrity comes goodwill and trust in the individual and/or organization, which is essential for leadership in general. Unlike most leaders, Morrison (2001) suggested that global leaders face ethical dilemmas on a daily basis and in much more depth. Hence, the necessity for specific competencies in order to uphold personal and relational integrity becomes paramount. He maintains that the most difficult aspect is creating a balance between what is universally ethical and one's personal understanding of what is relatively ethical.

Emotional intelligence has been defined as a core component in global leadership. Atkinson and Meldrum (1998) developed a classification of meta-abilities for the global leader, which include cognitive skills, emotional resilience, and personal drive. These dimensions allow the leader to best determine when and how these skills will be used in a given international immersion experience. Cognitive skills are those allowing the individual to see things from a variety of perspectives; emotional resilience allows the individual to maintain confidence and control while faced with difficult situations; and personal drive allows the individual to embrace determination and create innovative opportunities while taking personal risks.

Black and colleagues (1999) suggested that effective global leaders must emotionally connect with people while maintaining high standards for personal integrity. In their theory, an emotional connection includes creating and sustaining close personal relationships, along with concern for others, will to understand different viewpoints, advanced listening skills, and exchange of not just knowledge but feelings. Emotional connections allow you to understand your audience, uncover contextual clues, and ultimately create future leaders. Within the realm of global interactions, becoming self-aware of

who you are and how you respond within these situations is of the utmost importance in leadership (Goldsmith et al., 2003).

THE PRINCIPLE OF ACCOMPANIMENT

Throughout the literature, it is evident that most researchers have shaped their understanding of accompaniment through personal intercultural experiences. Clinton (1991) developed his understanding of accompaniment through his personal experience within low-budget development projects on the outskirts of Lima, Peru. His partnership with the Lutheran World Relief's Andean Regional Office allowed him to see how their efforts allowed for the funding of specific project proposals, joining the community without a supervising mentality. This support was especially effective instead of simply providing funds "with no strings attached" (Clinton, 1991, p. 63).

Further developing this idea, Kroeker (1996) coined his understanding of accompaniment with participant observation research, where research entitles its participants as individuals with meaning and knowledge. The researcher's reality, in this case, is based off of the collaborative research of multiple realms of knowledge. His concept of participant observation research was formed through his seven-month experience in Nicaragua, sharing and living the agricultural, village life of the Nicaraguan people. Kroeker recognized the continuous process of accompaniment through his experience: "By living among them, I was able to become recognized as an insider, engage in numerous conversations, verify emerging hypotheses, and determine subtle feelings and meanings" (Kroeker, 1996, p. 125).

His approach of accompaniment took on a qualitative, relational, and observational research perspective contrary to the previously emphasized quantitative paradigm. The researcher gained knowledge through participation and observations in meetings, conversations, and formal/informal documents viewed. From there, Kroeker developed an interpretation of findings, linking information through interviews, literature reviews, experiences in other Nicaraguan villages, and discovering common themes within the community. Kroeker's approach led to an entirely new field of participatory action research, which paved the way for a new combination of participation, observation, and action (1996).

Through his work with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Bolivia, Ausland (2005) developed his own understanding of accompaniment. Although there was not much clear direction in humanitarian aid, Ausland found himself multiple times simply conversing with different members of the community. This daily dialogue about transition, life, and family moved him to a new understanding—Ausland's "title and position were being eroded; [he] was becoming real to them" (2005, p. 5). This was a dual process, where Ausland's stereotypes and previous visions of poverty were stripped away as he adopted the persona of a neighbor.

As this friendship continued, Ausland began to learn about their culture, food, and how to better adapt, and ultimately was invited into their homes. His words reside true of his dialogue and maintaining relationships among members of the community: "over tea, we built trust and became vulnerable together" (Ausland, 2005, p. 6). Both members, through an exchange of information, became "mutually indebted, . . . operating at eye-level with the community, . . . [making] all the difference in the quality and impact of [their] time together" (Ausland, 2005, p. 6). For Ausland, it is necessary to assess the portrayal of the self in such situations. To be perceived or to perceive oneself as the "hero" will neither be effective nor hold many answers.

Taking the Next Step and Creating Sustainability

IMMERSION THROUGH ACCOMPANIMENT

In 2011, the researchers embarked on a six-month preparation process with a group of 12 undergraduate students who would eventually travel to Zambezi, Zambia, with the intention to deliver leadership, elementary, and computer education along with home-based-care nursing. The students attended weekly course lectures and discussions aimed at the development of global leadership competencies, cursory language (Luvale/Lunda) skills, and a rudimentary understanding of the Zambian culture. The students were also provided with ample time to design curricula that they would administer while in Zambia.

The students arrived via single-propeller planes in May 2011 and were promptly greeted by the people of Zambia. The people were singing and immediately embraced the students, welcoming them to Zambezi with an excitement for what they would bring to their lives. Over the next month, the students lived in a small building on the property of a church compound. They spent each morning engaging the community in structured activities taught in their contextual specialty areas (e.g., the education majors would teach at the elementary school, the nursing students would administer home-based-care nursing, etc.). Each afternoon, the students would facilitate sports (e.g., soccer, volleyball, basketball) and recreational activities for the children of the community in the dirt fields behind the church.

The morning teaching and the afternoon activities provided the students with an opportunity to share in a cultural exchange and reciprocity of engagement with the people of Zambezi. However, each night the students would provide perspectives to each other through structured reflection activities facilitated by the faculty members that were laced with frustration and emotionally charged with their inability to process through the lack of structure in the immersive context. They would often reflect upon their lack of preparation for "what Zambia truly was." Many of the students could not understand why the children of the community constantly asked them for material items or why people in the market would ask them for money. They would discuss the frustration of "having to play with the kids" each afternoon considering that they were tired from the morning activities. The students had prepared for the Zambians and their culture, but they had not prepared for the lack of structure that would ultimately result in the adjustment of their curricula. They had prepared for the food that they would eat and the supplies that they would need while there, but they had not developed a perspective of their own privilege, which allowed for their misperceptions and guided their interactions with the people of the community.

This was a critical flaw of the educational experience. Although the faculty members had constructed a well-articulated plan for implementation of the student projects and created structure that would ensure safe travel to and from Zambia, they had undermined the experience by providing unrealistic expectations of the immersive

context and had not developed the necessary self-awareness in the students, which would ultimately allow them to fully share their culture with the people of Zambia and fully engage in the process of accompaniment.

However, the community of Zambezi also did not fully embrace the mutually beneficial relationship of the students. During the time that the researchers spent in Zambia, unobtrusive site visits were conducted and informal qualitative data were collected to examine the impact of the student-led programs on the community of Zambezi. The researchers found that the students had a tremendous impact on the community of Zambezi. The respondents interviewed were incredibly complimentary regarding the work that had been done by the students. They also appreciated the long hours and valued that the group “would bring education to Zambia.” However, each one of the respondents mentioned the financial benefit of the students and their university on their community numerous times. During the informal discussions with the respondents, it seemed as though the number of emergent themes grounded in the idea of sustainability were outnumbered significantly by those relating to the financial benefit of the students coming to Zambezi.

Upon returning, the faculty members conducted a reflection-based retreat and again offered students the opportunity to provide perspectives about the impact that they had on the community of Zambezi during the month that they were there. The students almost unanimously noted that they were intimately touched by the experience and that it had a transforming effect on them. However, they also noted that they were unsure of the impact that they had on the community of Zambezi. One student noted that they “went there, had an amazing month, but then left” and that he was unsure of the impact that they had on the people there. Another provided that “it was a life changing experience and [she] will never forget the people of Zambia, but [she] cannot help but wonder if they will remember her.”

A FRAMEWORK FOR MOVING BEYOND THE CURRENT MODEL

The example provided is a snapshot of an experience where the preparation was well grounded in the idea of accompaniment and attempted to develop global competence and intercultural perspective in undergraduate students through the most altruistic and intentional of

efforts. Nevertheless, although the resulting experience had a powerful impact on the students, the community that those students served was not provided with the depth and opportunities for sustainability that were expected for the immersion experience. This deficit creates an opportunity for learning and the refocusing of the facilitation, and more specifically the preparation stage of the immersive undergraduate experience.

It has become apparent that many challenges face global leaders, which require further research and analysis. Morrison (2000) noted that many individuals already have their own personal views on which leadership model has been effective for them; it causes pressure for further exploration in global leadership in its context. However, it is the authors' contention that the idea of global competency development must begin with self-awareness. As noted by Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2004), it is critical for people to develop into emotionally intelligent individuals capable of accurately perceiving their emotions and using integrated, sophisticated approaches to regulate themselves as they proceed toward important goals. This is even more critical when the people are undergraduate students faced with the daunting task of creating opportunities for sustainability in developing countries. Thus, self-awareness is the foundation for all immersive experience training and preparation programs.

In addition, the concept of accompaniment has become an important piece to service. It has stretched cross-culturally among varying organizations, experiences, and locations, and recent literature has allowed the advancement of further understanding of effective utilization of accompaniment. However, accompaniment takes time. As Ausland (2005) noted, the development of mutual indebtedness and the development of trust and the ability to be vulnerable was the result of daily dialogue about transition, life, and family over time. To that end, educators need to be patient with this process and first establish a foundation of accompaniment before developing a future of sustainability. This is critical because although the faculty members guiding these excursions are most likely well intentioned, it would be “unethical” to obtain knowledge from such impoverished individuals in a “detached manner” (Kroeker, 1996, p. 136). Accompaniment forms the foundation for the immersive experience, but the tangible and sustainable impact on the community lies within the

opportunities that present themselves through the mutually beneficial relationships of the future.

Finally, for sustainability to be possible, it is critical that the people within the communities of the developing countries do not view the students and the university that they represent as wealthy donors coming to support the developing communities financially. Although their perceptions are grounded in historical contexts and are difficult to change, the impetus lies in the hands of the faculty members and universities that facilitate these student experiences to change these perspectives and ultimately the culture of sustainability in these developing countries. Dambisa Moyo (2009) wrote that the idea that aid can alleviate systemic poverty is false. Further, that aid has been and continues to be an unmitigated political, economic, and humanitarian disaster for most parts of the developing world.

Immersion opportunities for undergraduate students must be firmly rooted in an accompaniment first, sustainability second, type of perspective. Through increased attention to the development of self-awareness, innovative instructional efforts aimed at cultivating global competencies, and more realistic expectations about the communities that they are serving, undergraduate students will begin to develop a recipe for accompaniment and strengthen their resolve to create sustainable opportunities for those whom they serve through mutually beneficial relationships.

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