

Ethical Dilemmas: Cultivating Critical Awareness in Service-Learning

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Experiential Education; Non-Formal Education; Partnerships; Program Design; Program Assessment; Student Learning and Development; University/Higher Education

Setting

Critical service-learning is becoming more prevalent in many international education programs as a form of community engagement. It offers students a unique opportunity to learn with and from host communities and involves working in collaboration with local communities on relevant social change issues. An important component of critical service-learning is ongoing reflection that emphasizes one's positionality and ethical engagement while working with community members.

Juntos is a program provider organization in a rural town in Mexico that offers various critical service-learning research programs for students from the United States. All Juntos staff members live and work full-time in the community and have cultivated close relationships with community members. Most staff members are from the United States, but there are a few local Mexican staff members. Juntos has a solid reputation in the community and works year-round on community development projects in addition to their service-learning programs for students.

Juntos hosts a two-month summer program each year for both graduate and undergraduate students to participate in a service-learning research project related to the provider's ongoing community development work. The students are given a lot of autonomy to co-design the research with Juntos and to determine the most suitable projects to work on. The research is meant to be iterative and adapted based on what students observe and experience in the community.

In this particular program, there are 10 undergraduate students and two graduate students who serve as mentors to the undergraduate students. The students are all participating as part of a university program that promotes service-learning research. None of the students knew each other before the program. The university selected the student participants through a competitive application process and chose Juntos as the provider due to its work in critical service-learning. The university briefly trained the graduate student mentors in how to facilitate reflections with the undergraduates. The graduate mentors have significant experience working in rural Mexico and are meant to work closely with Juntos staff to ensure that the undergraduates have a safe and fulfilling experience. After selecting the students and training the graduate students, the university does not play a role in the rest of the program until students return from Mexico.

Juntos designs the pre-departure and onsite orientations for the students. To encourage critical reflection, Juntos prompts all of the students to consider issues of equity, ethical community engagement, power dynamics, and positionality. Students complete an in-depth online pre-departure course around these topics, which includes relevant readings, case studies, and discussion boards. The topics are also emphasized during the week-long onsite orientation. These orientations are meant to adequately prepare students for the challenges of conducting research in a rural community, ensuring that they approach it ethically and uphold Juntos' values.

Each student on the program speaks at least beginner-level Spanish. All students live with Mexican host families with two to three other students for the duration of the program. The host families are all experienced in hosting international students and help students practice Spanish and learn about the local culture.

Case

For the first two weeks of the eight-week program, the undergraduates generally had high spirits and were excited to learn about different service-learning research methods, including interviews and surveys. They discussed the challenges of interviewing across linguistic and cultural barriers and developed strategies for overcoming these challenges. They piloted their interview protocol and practiced interviewing in Spanish with Juntos staff.

However, around week three when students started conducting the research with local community members, they quickly became disheartened and unmotivated. They were nervous to interview community members and eventually approached the graduate student mentors. They said they were concerned that their work was not ethical, and they did not think it was their place as "outsiders" of this community to conduct this research. The students brought up issues of positionality, race, socioeconomic status, and country of origin that created a troubling power dynamic with the local community members whom they were interviewing. Many students expressed that they were uncertain if they wanted to continue on with the project.

The graduate student mentors, with their previous community development experience, understood the concerns of the undergraduate participants. However, they were somewhat surprised that it became such an issue, even

after the pre-departure and onsite orientations explicitly discussed these potential dilemmas. They facilitated reflections with the students and reinforced that these were valid preoccupations, but also reminded them that Juntos has years of working alongside the community on projects like this. The reflections just seemed to fuel the students' uncertainties and hesitance about working in the rural communities.

The mentors then decided to communicate these issues with the Juntos staff, as staff had not previously participated in any of the student reflections. The staff understood the concerns and were appreciative that the students were critically thinking about their work, but they wanted to encourage students to continue with the research project, as this was all part of their experiential learning process. The staff and graduate mentors tried to brainstorm how to move forward, as the students seemed paralyzed.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- In what ways can the graduate mentors and Juntos staff collaborate to address the undergraduate participants' concerns and move forward with the rest of the program?
- How could the sending university better train/prepare graduate mentors to deal with these types of conversations/situations in the future?
- Does Juntos have a responsibility to involve the sending university in this case? Likewise, does the sending university have a responsibility to intervene and work with the graduate students and/or Juntos staff to resolve the issue?
- What could be the ethical, financial, or academic ramifications of the students refusing to continue with the program? Are there any other impacts this would have?
- How could local community members be involved in the resolution of these issues?
- In what ways can Juntos adapt its orientations (both pre-departure and/or onsite) to prepare students for their critical service-learning experience? What topics or strategies would be helpful?
- How might program providers, like Juntos, balance the needs of students and community members in community engagement programs to ensure the most equitable outcomes?