

FOSTERING GLOBAL

“So much has been destroyed I have cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.” — Adrienne Rich

I CAN STILL PICTURE ALICE PERFECTLY. It was summer of 2003, and I was with a small group of high school girls from St. Mary’s Academy (Colorado) in the Quito region of Ecuador, on my first service-learning trip with students. Alice, a rising senior, was down on her hands and knees, cleaning the dirty bathroom floor at a children’s shelter. Most of the girls had stopped their work early and were outside, chatting in the sunshine with their T-shirts rolled up to tan their stomachs, enjoying the attention of the children, and being very hard to motivate. But Alice and a few others were still scrubbing the floor around the toilets.

“You’re allowed to take a break,” I told them.

Alice grinned at me and wiped the sweat from her forehead. “That’s OK, Ms. Klein. This is what we’re here for.”

I tried to argue with her, but she argued back — and won. While several of her peers couldn’t climb far enough down their socioeconomic pedestals to really connect with the people we met in Ecuador, Alice was completely present in the moment. She never stopped working and learning with the quiet, determined focus of an emerging leader who already understood that the real work isn’t about glory — it’s about getting your hands dirty and being of use.

TEACHING
YOUNG
LEADERS
TO BE OF
REAL USE

JENNIFER D. KLEIN

GRIT





WE CAN HELP STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THAT WHAT MATTERS MOST AS THEY GO OUT INTO THE WORLD IS THEIR WILLINGNESS TO TAKE ON THE MOST INGLOURIOUS OF JOBS FOR THE MOST COMPASSIONATE OF REASONS — WITHOUT BELITTLING OR DEHUMANIZING THE PEOPLE WE WORK ALONGSIDE WITH THE ASSUMPTION THAT WE'RE THERE TO SAVE THEM.

Leading from the Middle of Chaos

That first experience taking students to the developing world left me wondering what creates the Alices of the world. Too often, North American society equates *leadership* with *the spotlight*. As a culture, we're much better at celebrating our most obvious heroes than we are at honoring — or even acknowledging — the quiet leaders working hard in the background. It's not that fame and good leadership are mutually exclusive — not at all. But the most valuable leaders, in my opinion, are those who deliberately step into the middle of the action, giving their time

and energy to collaborate with others in myriad ways without asking anything in return — those who, were you to ask them what they have done with their lives, would never even think to call it leadership. They're too busy scrubbing toilets to worry about who's watching.

As teachers and trip leaders, we're in a perfect position to foster students' global grit, to help young people understand that authentic international service is dirty, hot, inglorious work, the kind of work that doesn't always show clear rewards but usually requires its measure of blood, sweat, and tears. We can help students under-

stand that what matters most as they go out into the world is their willingness to take on the most inglorious of jobs for the most compassionate of reasons — without belittling or dehumanizing the people we work alongside with the assumption that we're there to save them.

We're also in a position to help students understand that such work is an essential form of leadership in a world full of great inequities and profound need. The most meaningful leadership is rarely what happens in the spotlight. Rather, it's exhibited in people who lead quietly from the middle of chaos — in those who are willing to

give of themselves without illusions of grandeur or a need to define what the work should look like from their own cultural perspective. In fact, the best kinds of global leadership include a certain humility that doesn't translate well on the stage.

But to do this, we need to be clear in our own minds about the importance of such service.

True Service and Authentic Learning

I was raised in schools that developed my mettle in exactly this way. A product of early progressive education, specifically the experiential models of The School in Rose Valley (Pennsylvania) and the Jefferson County Open Living School (Colorado), I was educated through experiences designed to draw me out of my comfort zone and develop my capacity to lean into discomfort and navigate difficult, unpredictable situations. I canoed the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia, swam with manatees in Florida, did lengthy solos in the Colorado Rockies, found lunch and a shower with 67 cents and two bus tokens in downtown Denver, and backpacked through Europe for two months. These adventures devel-

oped a deeper understanding of the complexity of this world, and they helped me discover the depths of my own resilience, creativity, and empathy as a learner and human.

But my childhood development was most impacted by service travel, by doing service and development in cooperation with the communities we went to — by travel with a purpose beyond seeing the sights. I completed two service trips to Hermosillo, Mexico, in ninth and tenth grade, where we rebuilt schools and where I had my first glimpse of profound poverty. As a senior, I worked in a kibbutz and a youth hostel in Israel for six months, becoming deeply engaged in understanding the challenges of social justice and human rights as a result. In the process, I came to understand my place in the world, that my “hands,” as poet Carolyn Forché puts it, “were tied to do something” about the poverty, bigotry, and discord I saw.

Service travel and this deep engagement I always felt with the marginalized of the world was never about glory. In fact, to this day I still feel guilty if I think about what I might be getting personally out of the work I do. Any time something reeks of ego grati-

fication, I go looking for the dirtiest job I can find and try to forget myself as much as possible. Inspired global leaders who can outline major cultural and environmental issues and motivate us toward change matter a great deal. Scientists who can solve our more taxing challenges are essential to our progress. Artists who can help us better understand our connected humanity deserve our attention and support. But we also need people — lots of people — willing to roll up their sleeves and pitch in in a thousand small ways. In my mind, the latter kind of leadership matters more than we think.

As a classroom teacher, I strove to re-create those same epiphanies for my students for 19 years through the literature I chose and the themes I highlighted. Like many experiential and global educators inside of traditional schools, I often felt like a round peg in a square hole, as if my push for harder global dialogue inside the classroom and grittier developing-world travel outside of it elicited more irritation than support from the powers at my schools. In the independent school world, dominated by three- and four-star pre-packaged tours to Europe, something that takes us deeper into the human condition than one-shot tourism or drive-by service, something that takes us off the tour bus and into the community, isn't always the most popular option. But given the missions of most independent schools, it should be.

Deep community immersion and service-learning experiences bring students a million daily lessons, each one potentially transformative. Harder, more authentic service experiences in the developing world broaden students' sense of what they're capable not just of *surviving*, but even of *enjoying*. The best service travel throws kids into difficult experiences, such as local homestays, which are an immediately humbling reality check. Living with impoverished rural families in the developing world means seeing real leaders in a wholly different context: women who raise multiple children with nothing but their own resolve, men who leave home at 3 a.m. and return at 9 p.m. to provide



WHEN STUDENTS START TO REALIZE THAT LIVING AND WORKING ALONGSIDE OTHER HUMANS IN THEIR DAILY LIVES REALLY IS A CONTRIBUTION, THEY BECOME INCREASINGLY UNCONCERNED WITH PRODUCING TANGIBLE OUTCOMES AND FOCUS INSTEAD ON BUILDING A CONNECTION WITH THE PEOPLE AROUND THEM.

a better life for their children. Students see their host siblings studying out of torn, crumbling textbooks (if they have any at all), often traveling hours by foot or bicycle to get to school. Students live in rooms without glass windows, take cold showers without much privacy, work hard, and realize that these experiences aren't killing them, that the people around them live through this every day, that there's a resilience and basic toughness in their host families that they've never seen before — and they get tougher themselves. Students discover that their host families don't even call it hardship — it's just life — and they learn that the mother of five who takes the time to show up at the PTA and have a voice in her children's education is a leader in the truest sense.

I remember watching students from the Challenge Foundation (Colorado) react to the story of a woman in Cuernavaca, Mexico, who told them she was working three and a half jobs — approximately 90 hours a week — because she knew her four kids needed an education to leave the neighborhood. She lived in a squatters' community in a clean, pretty space her husband had built with his own hands over 15 years on land they could lose at the whim of the government. I remember watching my 11 inner-city kids take this in, watching them reflect on the sacrifices their own parents made every day. And I remember thinking that this kind of real-world education is at least as valuable as what happens inside the four walls of the classroom — if not more so.

Service travel provides a necessary balance to the classroom experience in creating people who think for themselves and live lives of passion and purpose — just as the missions of most independent schools claim we want for our graduates. Travel to the developing world helps students understand that the accident of birth worked in their favor, but that they can choose to use those advantages for the good of others — and even have a moral responsibility to do so. They realize that life doesn't happen *to* you, but that you can *choose* to engage with others and find collaborative solutions to the world's problems. And when this happens, suddenly things that always seemed impossible to bear or survive become small grievances against the backdrop of the broader human experience.

Helping students to develop this global grit must be a conscious effort in schools, both in our schoolhouse curriculum and in the forms of service travel we choose for our students. What the service industry calls “bricks and mortar service” is what most teenagers tend to crave. It makes sense. It's empowering to look at a tangible finished product — a new building or a painted wall — and be able to say, “I contributed to that.” Students first learn to lead with the work of their hands, so it's not surprising that they love to paint murals and sign the sides of schools as though their contributions have given them that much ownership over another community's labor and development. On the other hand, I've seen many students struggle to

find the value in relieving a teacher for an hour or playing soccer with children during recess. Ironically, it's usually the most well-meaning, compassionate students who are most desperate to make a difference they can see.

Building structures and painting walls certainly have their value — which is to say, those involved are being of use to others — but the most important goals of service occur at a deeper human level of connection. I remember two students I took to Ghana, who worked with me in an elementary school in Kumasi. They had to wait for their rides each day after service, so they started telling classic Western fairy tales to the children on the front steps, most of whom had never met a white person before we showed up — and the crowd grew every afternoon until they had an audience of almost 50 kids on our last day. Both of these girls are now studying international development. When students start to realize that living and working alongside other humans in their daily lives really is a contribution, they become increasingly unconcerned with producing tangible outcomes and focus instead on building a connection with the people around them.

Learning to Suspend Ego

Much like teenagers, adults feel the same discomfort when they perceive their service to be less than profoundly meaningful. When I led a faculty development trip to rural Costa Rica for World Leadership School in 2011, several teachers

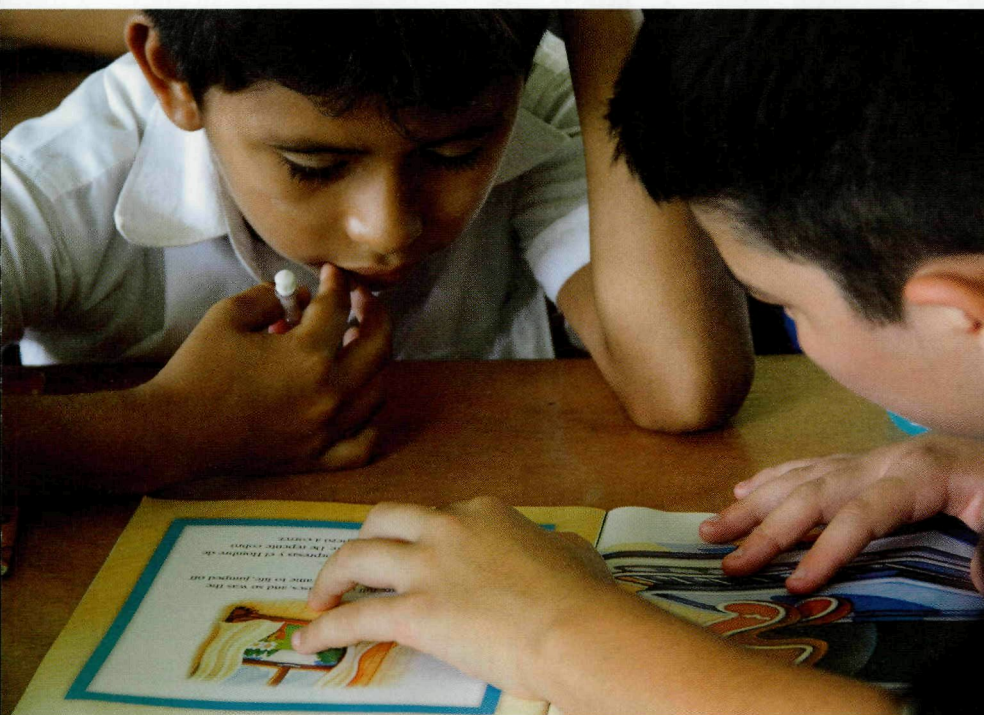
struggled with the feeling that they were only contributing by doing jobs someone else could have done — that they were not having enough of an impact on the community. In my small work group, we spent four days covering Spanish-English dictionaries and reading textbooks, gifts from the Rotary Club, in plastic wrap. It was a job parents could have done, true, and one a PTA volunteer *would* have done in our own schools at home because teachers never have time for these kinds of details. But we could also see that no parents *had* stepped forward to do it, and that the

Ecclesiastes, that “all was vanity,” and there was no such thing as an altruistic act without ego gratification behind it. The student, Tina, seethed for months and, two years later, she wrote her college entrance essay about how she planned to use her life to prove him wrong.

Reflecting back on her fury and the learning that came from it, Tina writes, “Despite how much my opinions have changed since that argument, on some level I still refuse to believe in a world where people only do things for ego gratification. I think that even if there is ego present, that there can be some

that help students see the world and their potential role in it, experiences that make them willing to suspend ego and do the work for its own sake. What makes young people flexible, resilient, and innovative, willing to do something for bigger reasons than ego gratification, willing to get their hands dirty and lead from the middle regardless of reward? How do young people survive our culture of extrinsic rewards and learn to derive satisfaction from simply doing the work that needs to be done, without fanfare? There is some kind of magic that fosters these young agents of change, that empowers our young Alices and Tinas without over-empowering them, that develops their sense of right and responsibility in and to the world and moves them toward a deeper, more authentic level of global engagement and compassionate leadership.

And there is nothing more meaningful for me as an educator than to hear that a former student has been moved to act with passion and purpose in life, and that the accident of birth is working not just to his or her advantage but also to the advantage of our larger human family. We don’t need generations of students who see the world the way we do — we need truly innovative young people who can envision the world the way they’d like it to be, and who are actively involved in creating that change.



LIZZY PHELAN

books were sitting in boxes collecting dust, useless because no one wanted them destroyed with use. By sealing the books, we got them into classrooms immediately; it wasn’t a huge contribution, but it mattered. And it was what the community wanted, us to do, what they asked us to do. If we are doing true collaborative development, we aren’t the ones who should be determining what needs to be done on the basis of our own urge to find meaning and gratification.

Several years ago, a student of mine was infuriated by her 10th grade English teacher’s assertion, when teaching

level where people are acting solely out of compassion for others. I think a lot of my impetus to affect change came not from ego, but from a sadness and frustration with how much suffering exists in the world and a feeling that something had to be done about it, whether I wanted to or not, simply because ignoring these problems would mean that suffering can never end.”

I’ve spent much of my career trying to figure out how to create the kinds of transformative experiences that bring about this level of compassion and insight in young people, both inside the classroom and out, experiences

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