

Teaching Accompaniment: A Learning Journey Together

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ABSTRACT

Engaging in a complicated world to bring about positive change is challenging. Students often view themselves as either optimistic changemakers helping the “needy” or, conversely, recognize their own privilege and complicity in the world’s problems as sophisticated pessimists. Both framings are problematic. Reflecting on his own fraught experiences trying to “help poor children” at a small orphanage in Chile in the early 1980s, the author explores the concept of “accompaniment”—walking together with others—as a constructive framing to move beyond this problematic duality. Drawing on the insights of Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, Dr. Paul Farmer, and Ophelia Dahl, he explores how accompaniment informs their work. Reflecting on one’s own experiences of being well-accompanied opens up new ways of understanding how one might engage in a complicated world. The paper proposes that teaching about accompaniment in the classroom might also model ways to engage in a complex world.

KEYWORDS

Change, Development, Experiential Learning, Gustavo Gutierrez, Paul Farmer, Pedagogy, Theory-to-Practice

INTRODUCTION

When I was 23 years old, I went to South America for the first time. I planned to volunteer at a small orphanage in Santiago, Chile. I studied philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, giving me a solid classical education and no preparation for my ambitious plans to change the world — or at least the lives of the children at the orphanage. It was 1982, and I knew little of Chile’s military government and the upended political and economic situation I was about to enter. My Spanish was terrible.

Those limitations, though, in no way tempered my vision of the many plans I had to improve the lives of the 13 children I would soon meet at the *Domingo Savio* orphanage, located in a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Santiago. Shortly after arriving there, I lined them up and, in my broken Spanish, explained how not only was I going to live with them but that we were also going to work together, joyously, to create a family farm. “*Ustedes estar feliz*,” I told them in my broken Spanish. “*You to be happy*.” The kids looked on quizzically. Most were under eight years old.

I exuded an earnestness that was enormously well-intentioned; in retrospect, embarrassingly so. Truth be told, I did not have a clue about the challenges Chile was facing, the ordeals these kids had endured, or what I was doing.

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About three months after I arrived, toiling with a less-than-enthusiastic group of kids in the hot Santiago summer to launch my vision of a family farm to improve everyone's lives, I became ill, very ill. I landed in bed with a fever that climbed higher each day and learned I had para-typhus. I stayed in bed for more than three weeks except for going to the bathroom.

The people I had so earnestly come to serve (and whose lives I had imagined transforming) had to take care of me. I wept, partly from the illness, but mostly out of frustration at how little the vision of me sick in bed resembled the one in my head of an autonomous *me* helping the needy *them*. That equation had been flipped.

Though they had few material resources, everyone at *Domingo Savio* — adults and children — cared for me with incredible grace. A month or so later, having been tended by a doctor and generously provided with medicine (bought with money I still do not know the source of), chastened and humbled, I began re-evaluating many things. One was my assumptions about how we think about “helping the poor,” one version of which is called “international development.”

Many years later, I wrote a book called *Santiago's Children: What I Learned about Life at an Orphanage in Chile* about my two years living at *Domingo Savio* and based on journals I kept. In many ways, it was a cautionary tale of the many things that can go wrong from misguided good intentions. At the same time, I also learned that children can be incredibly resilient, especially when given structure and love; that repression, unemployment, and illness all undermine one's sense of inherent human dignity; that U.S. policies reverberate around the world and can dramatically impact national policies that impact people who have no interest in politics; and that maybe, just maybe, it was not so bad to have big dreams, even if they fell short, as clearly they did in my case.

Even when the book was published in 2008, more than 25 years after I landed at the orphanage, I still did not have the precise language to describe what I learned in Chile. Over the past years, I have realized that the word is *accompaniment* — *the working and walking with others, not bestowing charity on them*.

Haltingly, tentatively, at first, I realized that one of the central things I learned in Chile was how well I had been accompanied and, as such, transformed. When I most required it, the people of *Domingo Savio* were at my side: hailing a doctor, scrounging up the resources to buy the medicine I desperately needed, and nursing me through my illness. They did not see their caring for me as a grand gesture of generosity; they simply did, in the moment, what needed to be done. But it was not only when I was sick that they accompanied me. They accompanied me — especially the kids — as they taught me Spanish and helped me understand the complexities and nuances of their lives and the possibilities for finding some paths forward, which we began to work on together.

Even though I had landed on their doorstep with plans to be “their helper,” they accompanied me, and during those first two years and the many intervening ones, I think I have learned – and am still learning– to accompany them as well. For all my mistakes, something worked well in our time together, and a little like the character in Moliere who discovered to his astonishment that he had been speaking prose all his life, I have realized that we have been on a journey accompanying one another for a long time.

Now, more than 40 years later, *Domingo Savio* and the people associated with it remain a central part of my life. I remain connected to the “kids,” who now have their own families, and to *Domingo Savio*, which is still located in the same house (though it is no longer a residential orphanage but a neighborhood center working with — might I say *accompanying* — local kids and their families). My life has been enriched through those relationships, and the concept of accompaniment has given me a new lens to understand my teaching and global development work.

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