

Chapter 88

Challenges of Practicing and Honing Leadership Skills through Cross- Cultural Service Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides insight into the unexpected cross-cultural challenges faced by service learning project coordinators in an overseas setting. The chapter focuses on a service learning project geared towards undergraduate U.S. leadership students on a 5-week summer study abroad trip to Austria. The instructor sought to utilize the abroad experience to highlight the value of service learning as a medium to benefit the local Austrian community, while furthering the U.S. students' understanding of cross-cultural leadership. Like other individuals in a new host culture (i.e. expatriates), the service learning project coordinator (US instructor) faced a variety of unexpected cross-cultural challenges upon arrival in the host culture (Austria). This chapter highlights some universal cross-cultural challenges (lack of cultural and organizational familiarity, culture shock), why they can be expected, and why they are often difficult to resolve. Potential solutions addressing these challenges in the context of cross-cultural service learning projects are also explored.

INTRODUCTION

The experience from a project meant to serve others is as much a gain in lessons learned for those serving as it is for those being served. This is the main idea driving the expansion (and added value) of what are known as “service learning” projects in post-secondary education in the 21st century. “Service learning” was first introduced in 1967 to describe the educational philosophy of integrating classroom concepts with a related community service experience (Sanderson, 2003; in Mensch & Ali, 2009, p.810). Although it was initially limited to programs such as Education, English and the social sciences, it has

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since been utilized in other academic programs because of its usefulness as a learning tool (Mensch & Ali, 2009, p.810). Service learning is as much about the experience and reflection (on the experience) as it is about service. In fact, Chaytor (2003) described service learning as, “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote students with learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts to service learning” (p.226; Mensch & Ali, 2009, p.810). Indeed, learning outside of the classroom via projects meant to serve others could be just as productive as learning inside of the classroom. And as a small rock thrown into a pond will cause ripples to expand outward to uncharted waters, so has the scope of service learning projects expanded beyond traditional domestic borders to unfamiliar cultural borders. And, as is the focus of this article, there are some challenges of crossing cultural borders that ought to be considered when setting up and carrying out cross-cultural service learning projects.

More specifically, this chapter aims to: highlight some universal cross-cultural challenges (lack of cultural and organizational familiarity, culture shock) faced by service learning project coordinators in an overseas setting; provide information on why such challenges can be expected, and why they are often difficult to resolve; and to offer potential solutions addressing these challenges in the context of cross-cultural service learning projects.

COMBINING CROSS-CULTURAL SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT WITH UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP COURSE

A chance encounter on an Austrian train in 2014 between a U.S. leadership professor and the Director of the Kinderdorf Kronhalde of the Vorarlberger Kinderdorf (a state-funded children’s home in Bregenz, the capital of the Austrian province of Vorarlberg) was the starting point. This coincidental meeting on a night train from Bregenz to Vienna led to an invitation for the U.S. professor (and leadership students on a 5-week study abroad program) to visit the Kinderdorf Kronhalde in June of 2014. This experience planted the seed that would eventually grow into the idea of a cross-cultural service learning project to be carried out by the next group of undergraduate U.S. leadership students in 2015. And, as a cross-cultural service learning project, it was designed to benefit residents of the Kinderdorf Kronhalde and the U.S. leadership students.

The cornerstones of the Kinderdorf Kronhalde were laid by a local Austrian priest as the ashes of World War II were settling. As a medic for the German Army on the Western Front, Father Hugo Kleinbrod, an ordained priest from Vorarlberg, promised himself that after the war, he would set up a children’s home to serve all of the children whose dying fathers he helped to care for. The home was desperately needed as, by the end of the war, there were tens of thousands of war orphans all around Austria, and no place to house and care for them. Thus, Father Hugo Kleinbrod established in 1951 the Verein Kinderdorf Vorarlberg (Children’s Home of Vorarlberg Association), which would become the precursor to the Vorarlberger Kinderdorf (Children’s Home of Vorarlberg), the umbrella organization under which the Kinderdorf Kronhalde in Bregenz – and the subject of this project – currently falls.

The eight U.S. leadership students in 2015 were completing the course “*Leading in Diverse and Global Environments*” offered by the Kentucky Institute for International Studies (KIIS) as a part of its Austria Program, which has served as the longest-running (since 1975) study abroad program of KIIS’ 27 programs. The leadership students were taking two, 3-credit hour courses (one leadership course

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