

The Role of Student Leadership in International Service Learning: A Literature Review

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Bringle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Robert" being the most prominent.

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Robert Bringle, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology

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### **Abstract**

In the field of international service learning (ISL), there is much debate about the quality of the academic component of alternative break programs, a popular concept in the world of student programming in higher education today. Alternative break programs allow students to travel, both domestically and internationally, and serve during their university breaks as well as participate in classes meant to expand their understanding of the culture, history, and social problems of the area they are working in. Some institutions offer course credit for international alternative break programs. To increase the transformative power of these programs, institutions will often allow student leaders to take control of planning, including designing and teaching classes. This project aims to raise the question: what effects, both positive and negative, does student leadership have on these programs? I conduct a literature review of publications in the realm of ISL, explore models from the alternative break movement, and also use my personal experience with leadership of international alternative break programs to illustrate the lessons learned related to student leadership. Additional queries raised include: Is the goal to give students ownership of their learning and create collaboration between peers reached at the cost of a quality academic understanding of the experience as a whole? How does student leadership affect the role of reflection? Further research opportunities are also discussed.

### **Introduction and Background**

In order to begin discussing the implications of student leadership in international alternative break programs, a clear definition of an alternative break is necessary. A national nonprofit organization called Break Away has established itself as a premier resource for the alternative break movement, dedicated to the development of quality programs through training, assisting, and connecting campuses and communities. On their website (2015), they describe an alternative break as “a trip where a group of college students engage in direct service, typically for a week. Each trip has a focus on a particular social issue with exploration and immersion in that issue beginning long before the trip itself.” Piacitelli, Barwick, Doerr, Porter, and Sumka (2013) describe alternative break programs as short-term service-learning trips, meant to immerse students in direct service and education, resulting in “the creation of active citizens who think and act critically around the root causes of social issues” (p. 89).

Students, referred to as Peer Leaders, lead many alternative break programs. However, the concept of peer leadership is not unique to the alternative break movement; some of the first instances of peer leadership in an undergraduate setting were seen with orientation and residential life (Shook & Keup, 2012). Ender and Kay (2001), define peer leaders as “students who have been selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers [that] are intentionally designed to assist in the adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence of students toward attainment of their educational goals” (p.1). According to Cuseo (1991) and Hart (1995) peer leaders are empowered to exert a positive influence upon their peers in a way that is less intimidating and more accessible to fellow undergraduates than professional staff and faculty members. The role of peer leader also has great potential as a

resource in the undergraduate learning environment because of the flexibility that it offers (Shook & Keup, 2012).

In the setting of an international alternative break, for several months prior to the program Peer Leaders engage in a training course that focuses on leadership and social justice education. Topics discussed in training include “reflection facilitation, conflict management, non-formal curriculum development, communication, and asset-based approaches to volunteerism” (Piacitelli, et al., 2013, p. 90). The Peer Leaders are responsible for both arranging the trip logistics and ensuring that participants have a transformative experience while on program. Prior to the week of service, they plan and facilitate “pre-departure meetings” that are meant to prepare the group for their experience. During the week of service, a heavy emphasis is placed on reflection, facilitated by Peer Leaders, to get students critically thinking about the service that they are a part of.

This commitment to the use of student leadership is especially integral to the popular Break Away model of alternative breaks. During the pre-departure meetings, Peer Leaders spend time with participants teaching about the social issue that the experience focuses on, building the group dynamic, gaining relevant skills, and orienting participants to the mission and vision of the community partner or organization with which they will be working (Break Away, 2015). The faculty member who accompanies these groups, referred to as the Learning Partner, typically plays a role that is little more than a chaperone, one who is primarily required for issues of safety and liability.

As a student who has played the role of both participant, and Peer Leader, both internationally and here in the U.S., I have raised questions about the role of student leadership in these programs, especially in the international realm. I truly do believe in the

transformative power of these programs, despite their short duration, and I have thoroughly enjoyed my time participating in the Alternative Service Experience (ASE) program at Appalachian State University. However, I have found that despite being enrolled in bi-weekly classes for seven months that were meant to teach me how to educate a group of students for a program going to Guatemala, I still felt unprepared to teach them all I felt they should know before departing.

I had two rather different experiences with Learning Partners on the two international programs that I have been a part of. In the first, I was a participant traveling to the Dominican Republic, and the Learning Partner was a reading professor in the College of Education. She brought life and depth to the pre-departure meetings alongside the two Peer Leaders by offering different readings she had come across and crafting creative assignments with the Peer Leaders that integrated knowledge of the country, social issues, *and* personal growth. She had a vested interest in the success of the Peer Leaders and provided a great deal of mentorship to the two girls leading the program.

The second international program that I participated in, I served as one of the two Peer Leaders for a program going to Guatemala. My Learning Partner was fluent in Spanish, something neither my co-leader nor I could claim to be, and an avid lover of literature. I expected that he would bring a level of expertise to the class, in light of his experience with teaching and Masters degrees in both English and Spanish; however, I ended up being disappointed by the small role I felt he played in the classroom. I felt as though I had missed a chance to tap into precious resources that I knew he possessed. With comparisons of the two experiences and two Learning Partners constantly in mind, I began to reflect more heavily on the role that student leaders play in the education of participants.

The presence of these faculty members on alternative break programs is an excellent opportunity for students to learn, but one that is often overlooked. There appears to be an opportunity for collaborative education in the classes between faculty and student leaders, but the emphasis on student leadership and empowerment that is fundamental to these programs leaves this opportunity underexplored. The purpose of this literature review is to understand how to improve the international alternative break experience for university students. The goal is to produce an understanding of the highest quality educational and experiential alternative break program possible. If student leadership is examined and improved, the time and money that are poured into creating these international alternative break programs will be better spent. In a world where international service as a whole is under scrutiny, it is crucial that any form of international service be approached with excellence.

### **Chapter 1: Benefits of Student Leadership**

Based on the 2013-2014 National Chapter Survey conducted by Break Away, 52.5% of universities that are associated with the organization have alternative break programs that are for the most part student-led with staff that serve certain roles, and 26.2% of those universities have programs that are completely student-led. It must be noted, however, that these statistics are based upon the university programs as a whole. There is not a statistic available that distinguishes between the leadership of international and domestic programs. Appalachian State University's Alternative Service Experience (ASE) program is one that can be considered completely student-led, both internationally and domestically. The survey also reports that 12.8% of Break Away universities have almost completely staff-led

programs, and 8.5% have programs that have an even split between staff and student leadership.

The powerful role that peers play in human development has been widely recognized and explored, particularly within education (Shook & Keup, 2012). Many student development theories attribute great significance to the impact of peers in the process of maturation in interpersonal relationships (Shook & Keup, 2012). In fact, Astin (1993) goes so far as to conclude, “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) deduce from the review of their research findings that “students’ interactions with their peers . . . have a strong influence on many aspects of change during college, [including] intellectual development and orientation; political, social, and religious values; academic and social self-concept; intellectual orientation; interpersonal skills; moral development; general maturity and personal development” (p. 620-621).

According to Shook and Keup (2012), “the core purpose of peer leadership programs is to provide services and support to fellow students,” (p.7) and hopefully as the result of their interaction with more experienced and well-trained peers, “students can develop a stronger sense of community, greater social and academic integration, and a rich network of resource and referral agents dedicated to their success” (p.8). Community has been recognized as an important indicator of a student’s success in a college environment (Shook & Keup, 2012) and a group that participates on an alternative break together has the opportunity to form a tightly knit community that provides support and friendship for each participant. A large component of the role of a Peer Leader is to work to create a positive group dynamic that is inclusive to every participant. This may not be as feasible to achieve if

a faculty member were planning team building activities or encouraging the group to bond, rather than the Peer Leaders.

Multiple theories of college adjustment, student development, and retention identify the importance of community for student learning, retention, and success (Shook & Keup, 2012). Although undergraduate peer leaders have primarily focused on building and sustaining community within the social realms of college, students also have need of positive peer influence in academic domains (Shook & Keup, 2012). Because Peer Leaders are teaching the pre-departure courses, they are taking on a highly influential role in an academic domain. This is a task to be undertaken with great consideration, as peer leadership is not as widely practiced in academic realms compared social ones.

Many students speak very positively about their experiences as a Peer Leader or “site leader.” The University of Michigan, which has a well-respected alternative break program, writes a blog about its program; on the blog, certain students are showcased and given the opportunity to share their “Alternative Stories,” a series of narratives inspired by the experiences, memories, and meanings made and shared through their program. Nikole Koszarycz, who served as a student leader, writes, “I was so proud of my participants and was amazed by how much growth they demonstrated as the trip continued, which made me recognize how fulfilling it is to be a site leader” (2015). “Fulfilling” is a term that is, in my experience, frequently used to describe the way that students feel about their time as a Peer Leader or site leader.

The relationship that is built between a Peer Leader and participants often becomes one similar to a mentor-mentee relationship. A Peer Leader will, hopefully, see participants visibly grow and change throughout their experience with an alternative break program and



feel proud of their advancement. International programs, which offer up a plethora of complex issues that are not encountered in a domestic setting, are especially powerful in terms of the changes that they can create in participants. I can think of specific instances in which each one of the participants that I led to Guatemala made a certain connection, had a realization, or simply made a behavioral change that validated my hard work in planning and executing the program.

Although the goal of an international alternative break program is not self-gratification, admittedly, there is a great deal of satisfaction in seeing participants grow through the experience that you, as a Peer Leader, created for them. Serving in a capacity that forces a Peer Leader to problem solve, think critically, and lead a group of people could conceivably have a positive effect on his or her sense of self-efficacy. Another University of Michigan student, Geena Kerr, writes on the blog about her experience being a Peer Leader, saying, “It has provided me with the knowledge, resources, and confidence to grow and make and advocate for change” (2015). Kerr also served on the Leadership Team, similar to an executive board for alternative break programs, which makes organizational decisions and represents the program as a whole. She writes, “By joining the Leadership Team, I have been able to grow my critical thinking and communication skills” (Kerr, 2015). Personal growth and development for the peer leader is a benefit to utilizing student leadership that should be recognized and valued.

Newton and Ender (2010) note that peer leaders fulfill especially useful roles as “resource and referral agents” (p.167). Not only do they possess relevant knowledge, specialized training, and general accessibility, but peer leaders also are in close proximity to the student experience allowing them to easily refer other students to appropriate and

necessary resources. The role of a Peer Leader as a referral agent is one of the most powerful benefits to peer leadership in international alternative break programs. A foundational aspect of the alternative break movement is social justice education (Break Away, 2015; Piacitelli, Barwick, Doerr, Porter, & Sumka, 2013) and asking questions is a tremendous part of that education.

It becomes necessary for a student to grapple with their upbringing, attitudes, experiences, and biases in order to form their worldview. This can be an emotionally intensive process that extends far beyond the week in country. Upon returning to campus, a Peer Leader is able to serve as a referral agent in two ways a) if the participant needs support services in order to process re-entry into the U.S., and b) if the participant wants to become involved in campus organizations that will match newly found interests. For example, a Peer Leader could connect a participant to International Justice Mission or another club on campus that would allow him or her to become more educated in matters of social justice and community action.

There is also something to be said for the way that student leadership in the classroom portion of the alternative break program creates an opportunity for a leveled playing field of sorts. According to Manor, Block-Schulman, Flannery, and Felten, “From the point of view of students, the experience of education in the classroom almost always includes a hierarchy with an uneven distribution of power between professors and students. Professors are seen as having a majority of the power to educate, while students most likely see themselves as having secondary or no power” (p. 10, 2010). Considering this notion, it could be argued that peer leadership elevates certain students to a more powerful teaching position, and therefore

an example is provided to participants that is it indeed possible to play a more active role in your own education.

According to Manor et al., “students are habituated to believe that they are all but totally dependent on the professor” and “years of conditioning have taught students to accept the information bestowed upon the by the professor” (p. 11, 2010). The presence of a student at the front of the classroom, on the same level as a professor, gives program participants an opportunity to question the information that they are being presented. Without the power differential that is more intensified between student and teacher, the participants have a space in which they can feel more comfortable speaking out with questions or conflicts that they have.

This leveled playing field extends into the service on site, as well as the time following the alternative break program experience. The peer leader is available to the participants throughout the entirety of the experience as an approachable resource for processing and making sense of what is happening. They are relatable, because of their age and status as a student, and therefore they may be more suitable to approach with any issues that a participant may be having during the alternative break experience. Peer Leaders are role models; participants can look to them emulate their actions and attitudes. As an ASE participant, I know that I certainly appreciated and grew from my interactions with my Peer Leaders that grew into friendships.

Although Break Away does not use the language “servant leader,” I think it is fair to say that peer leadership is an example of servant leadership. Servant leadership is a philosophy and set of practices that is meant to enrich the lives of individuals, build better organizations and ultimately create a more just and caring world. Robert K. Greenleaf

officially coined the term in *The Servant as Leader*, an essay that he first published in 1970. A servant-leader is described as one who claims to be a servant first, and a leader second. Their counterparts are others who consider themselves a leader first; typically these people are more driven by desire for power than desire to grow the people that they are leading (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 6).

According to Greenleaf, the difference between these two leaders:

[M]anifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (1970, p.6).

A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. Although traditional leadership generally involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the "top of the pyramid," servant leadership is different (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, n.d., para. 5). The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, n.d., para. 5). These are all ideals of student leadership in alternative break programs. The goal is that peer leaders would walk alongside their participants and create a space in which they can grow, rather than looking down upon them as lesser parts of the team. This mentality could be tremendously beneficial to an organization, business, or community that a Peer Leader enters into post-graduation.

They would possess a skill set that fosters positivity and common good, and have real life experience with a leadership style that is becoming more widely discussed and adopted.

Although peer leaders are simply undergraduate students, without degrees that give them the authority to stand at the front of the classroom or a prestigious title of “Doctor” in front of their name, the utilization of their leadership on alternative break programs does have its benefits. Their youth can be a source of passion and encouragement for participants, and they have common ground with their participants that is simply not shared by more experienced faculty members. They have a unique insight into “what is like to actually be *this* particular student trying to make meaning of *this* particular subject at *this* particular time in *this* particular context” (Manor, et al., 2010, p. 11). However, their unique qualities as student leaders can only be wholly beneficial to the entire alternative break experience if they are carefully mentored by a faculty member who understands the purposes of the experience and knows how to maintain a balance of investment in the experience and giving the student leaders ownership over it.

## **Chapter 2: Potential Risks of Student Leadership**

### **General Risks of International Service-Learning**

The potential harm that can result from short-term international service is becoming more widely acknowledged and confronted by service-learning scholars. In higher education, international service-learning experiences are typically intentionally designed to avoid these potential harms by attempting to challenge attitudes such as “the belief that developing countries are inherently poor and Americans are all rich, or a persistent normalization of paternalistic/colonial relations” (Crabtree, 2013, p.50). However, despite good intentions, ISL courses can cultivate a mindset that reinforces these beliefs if not designed and executed

properly. As Crabtree writes, “international service-learning is, after all, not a panacea for community development,” (2013, p. 52) and because it is already inherently complicated, the decision to put undergraduate students in a leadership position is one that requires serious attention.

One of the key issues that continues to challenge practitioners of ISL is the difficulty of engaging students in ways that adequately respond to the economic and cultural roots of the inequalities of power while navigating the challenges of socio-economic, racial, ethnic and cultural difference with the host country (Andreotti 2006; Jorgenson and Shultz 2012). This becomes doubly difficult when the educator is operating within a short time frame; alternative break programs are typically comprised of a few meeting times before departure and then one week in country. To be able to engage students with these issues while still maintaining the dignity of the host country is no small feat. Creating this balance could be a challenge for any seasoned educator, thus it could prove to be much more demanding for an inexperienced undergraduate serving as a Peer Leader.

Rice and Pollack (2000) and Rosenberger (2000) employ the term “critical service learning” to describe academic service-learning experiences with a social justice orientation. Traditional, rather than critical, approaches to ISL may simply acknowledge the cultural, economic, historical differences between the students and those they are serving, and stop at merely learning *about* others: their poverty, oppression or experience of injustice (Larkin, 2015, p. 144). To stop at identifying these characteristics leaves the possibility of learning *from* others untouched, and further, leaves the possibility for change in social relationships unexplored (Todd 2003, 2001). Social justice education is considered a pillar of the alternative break movement and it implies a desire for change in the social relations that

produce inequality and oppression (Larkin, 2015, p.144). However, alternative break programs, if not handled properly, have the possibility of maintaining or reinforcing those harmful social relations based on power differentials.

In situations where alternative break programs are created without critical consideration, the *perceived* (not proven, or identified by community members) needs of host communities are often deemed “service projects” by program coordinators or teachers to give students a way to engage within host communities. If this is the case, the alternative break potentially positions participants from universities from the developed world as the source of knowledge of, and solutions for, the problems of developing countries, rather than empowering the residents of the country to identify problems and create their own solutions. This further perpetuates the inequity and oppression that originally motivated the desire to engage with the host community (Andreotti, 2007). When groups of American students, clearly privileged in some fashion because of their status as university students, travel to a developing country to do service many issues arise that must be thoughtfully addressed.

Another criticism of the alternative break movement as it becomes more widely international, is that it may be comparable to voluntourism; this concept is distinguishable from volunteering because it is a corporatized version of volunteering, in which white people from all across the Western hemisphere have the ability to pick and choose an "exotic" population to help as well as how to help them, whether that is to build a house, "save" an orphan, or read to "illiterate" children (Jose, 2014). Although this ability to pick and choose a cause is not necessarily an advertised benefit to alternative break programs, as studying abroad becomes increasingly popular (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011, p.6) there is certainly a

population of college students with a desire to travel to exotic locations who could be attracted to an international alternative break for that reason.

In an opinion piece about orphanage tourism, a branch of voluntourism, Zalaria (2014) writes, “As admirably altruistic as it sounds, the problem with voluntourism is its singular focus on the volunteer’s quest for experience, as opposed to the recipient community’s actual needs” (para. 4). In recent years, academics and activists alike have questioned the ethics of voluntourism, particularly its tendency to exploit (Zalaria, 2014). Although schools whose alternative break programs fall under the Break Away umbrella do acknowledge and discredit the backward thinking that voluntourism can often promote, such as reinforcing white saviorism, it is still complicated and difficult to avoid these dangerous ideas while setting out to go on a short-term international service program. Additionally, if it can be agreed upon that students serving as Peer Leaders gain a great deal of personal development from the experience, there could be a attitudinal shift that focuses too much on the benefits to the Peer Leaders themselves, rather than the community or even the participants.

Service-learning that is short-term in duration, even in a domestic setting, has been called into question (Birdsall, 2005; Daynes & Longo, 2004; Eby, 1998; Noley, 1977; Wallace, 2000). Eby’s 1998 essay that deemed service-learning as “bad” was one of the first to identify and expand upon the problems with short-term service-learning, including: the injection of poorly trained students into the community, the emotional impact on children of short-term service-learners who suddenly leave when their time together is finished, and the disruption of the organization’s workflow. In light of these questions and concerns, Tryon, Stoecker, Martin, Seblonka, Hilgendorf, and Nellis (2008) conducted research in order to



gain insight into the viewpoints of the community groups that host service-learners.

Specifically, they found that community groups expressed issues surrounding the following topics: investment of staff time; staff capacity to train and supervise; incompatibility with direct client service; timing and project management; and academic calendar issues.

Although they were not specifically exploring international projects or alternative break programs, their findings are still relevant to these programs because of their short duration and utilization of unskilled laborers.

Crabtree's (2004) essay that examines the intended and unintended consequences of ISL posits that for community members in the host country, outcomes may include a disruption of community relations, potential conflict, disappointment, or disaffection with home, in addition to some positive outcomes (p. 50). The community may also feel a sense of loss at the conclusion of the project (Crabtree, 2004) when the college students pack their bags and return to the U.S. This could be especially difficult for the children of the host community who are often doted with attention by American students eager to help and play. These interactions are also a breeding ground for "poverty porn" a term coined for the exploitation of the poor through media in order to gain sympathy, or perhaps in this case for students to gain "likes" on Facebook as they plaster their profiles with pictures of themselves covered in village children (Collin, 2009). Discussing the proper use of social media post-program is a difficult spot for Peer Leaders to be in; their youth makes them social media savvy, but their leadership position demands that they act beyond their years when it comes to taking pictures.

Peer Leaders need to be provided with prudent guidance from their Learning Partners as they navigate the convoluted world of ISL and approach the daunting opportunity to teach

their peers. Although all Peer Leaders undergo some degree of training before they lead their programs (varying based on the institution), the duration and quality of that training can make a poignant difference in the quality of their leadership. To even begin to grasp ISL pedagogy, while still learning about crisis management, group facilitation, and numerous other concepts that are central to peer leadership, a sustained and in-depth program of peer leader training is a necessity. International service-learning is not a concept that can be understood in a couple of all-day training events.

### **International Service-Learning Pedagogy**

International service-learning can be conceptualized as the intersection of three educational domains: service-learning, study abroad, and international education (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011, p. 4). It is an educational concept that borrows elements from each of these domains and creates powerful opportunities for learning and growth. Service-learning is at its core an academic activity, and should be treated as such. This strong academic component is what differentiates service-learning from volunteering, which is co-curricular and not intentionally linked to curriculum (Furco, 1996). If Peer Leaders are not properly trained in service-learning pedagogy, a simple volunteering experience could potentially be the result for participants of an alternative break program.

Few experienced teachers whom are interested in service-learning have sufficiently broad or sophisticated expertise in theoretical and methodological frameworks to understand the wide range of factors influencing an international service-learning engagement, particularly from the perspectives of host communities (Crabtree, 2013); these are capable professionals, holding secondary degrees. If it can be argued that there are faculty members whom are not prepared or suited for leading an ISL experience, it becomes a bit difficult to

argue that a 20-year-old student will be ready to assume the responsibility.

Faculty members teaching service-learning courses assume a crucial role by identifying and assessing learning outcomes and collaborating with community partners to structure experiences that contribute to the academic goals of the course (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011, p. 5). However, in an alternative break program setting, this role is assumed by an undergraduate student, the Peer Leader. If this student is an education major, perhaps they will be able to provide background knowledge of teaching and learning, but if not they likely have very little experience identifying and assessing learning outcomes or creating class curriculum. This is the point where the Learning Partner must step in and provide valuable expertise to the Peer Leaders. A strong and intentionally cultivated partnership between the professor with experience in educating and the passionate college student could be the key to creating a stronger leadership presence for alternative breaks.

ISL is frequently a pedagogy with which faculty have no direct, personal experience (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011, p. 20); faculty members who choose to facilitate ISL, although motivated by a variety of attitudinal factors and intellectual expertise, may not have deep academic preparation for the experience, cross-cultural communication skills, or knowledge of transformational learning theories (Crabtree, 2013, p.60). This presents a challenge for faculty members wanting to serve as Learning Partners who do not have any experience with service-learning. Faculty members who do have at least some general service-learning experience could be tremendously helpful to Peer Leaders, especially those leading for the first time, by agreeing to serve as Learning Partners. By pairing the more inexperienced or younger Peer Leaders with an Learning Partner who has a history with international or domestic service-learning, a mentorship opportunity will be created that could have a

positive effect on the quality and success of the Peer Leader's leadership.

Bringle and Hatcher suggest that faculty development activities need to be planned to help faculty become familiar with each of the three pedagogical domains of ISL (2011, p.20) and the same should be said for Peer Leaders. Learning Partners and Peer Leaders should *both* be trained and prepared *together* to encounter the complexities of ISL as a team, relying on what the other has to offer. Understanding the broad and multifaceted contexts of this work is critical and “should inform program development at our institutions, operational choices of partners and sites, management of the dynamics of an international service-learning project as it unfolds, and the study of outcomes” (Crabtree, 2013, p. 52). By implementing a thorough leadership development curriculum with strong pedagogical foundations for both Peer Leaders and Learning Partners, universities could provide leaders with additional support and refined skills to lead higher quality international alternative break programs. The discussion of reflection practices in the next chapter is a practical starting point from which alternative break program coordinators could inform their leader training.

### **Chapter 3: The Role of Reflection in International Alternative Breaks**

#### **Introduction to Reflection**

The value of reflection on experience as a way to enhance learning has been explored and valued for decades (Ash & Clayton, 2004). More than 100 years ago, Dewey (1910) described reflective thought as “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 6). Ever since, educators and service-learning practitioners alike have studied Dewey and the many thinkers who have come after him to gain understanding into the importance and meaning of reflection in higher education.

Undergraduate student Peer Leaders who are expected to be able to create and facilitate reflections on international alternative breaks are not typically privy to any of this background surrounding reflection; this presents an issue in terms of the quality of reflection that can be achieved.

The reflection process is central to the critical service-learning pedagogy that is expected of high quality alternative break programs (Piacitelli, Barwick, Doerr, Porter, & Sumka, 2013). Contrary to the images that may be conjured in the minds of inexperienced “alternative breakers,” the transformative power of international alternative break programs does not lie in overly emotional candle passes, sleeping on the floor with schoolmates, or keeping a diary. No, much of their power lies in the quality of the reflection process that is employed. Further, this process of reflecting can be all too easily associated with “touchy-feely introspection, too subjective to evaluate in a meaningful way and lacking in the rigor required for substantive academic work,” (Whitney & Clayton, 2011, p. 149).

However, reflection is in reality the primary mechanism that generates truly meaningful and powerful learning (Whitney & Clayton, 2011). Through the continuous cycle of experiential learning and the dialogue associated with reflection, students are challenged to think and react critically to issues faced by members of the communities with which they are involved (Piacitelli et al., 2013). The hope is that this instance of small-scale change during the week sparks a larger change in the life of the alternative breaker. Rogers (2001) claims that the process of reflection “allows the learner to integrate the understanding gained [through reflection] into one’s experience in order to enable better choices or actions in the future” (p. 41). This emphasis on the future is key. The concept of the Active Citizen that is central to alternative breaks relies on the notion that students will

act differently according to the experience that they had through their program, whether that be by becoming more involved in the community or more educated about social justice issues.

Immersion in the diverse environments of international alternative breaks enables participants to experience, discuss, and understand social issues in a substantial way (Piacitelli et al., 2013). Seeing the circumstances and social problems of the community in which they are working provides a deeper impact than simply reading about them in an article while sitting comfortably at home. Through critical reflection, students should make connections between their pre-trip education and their experiences in country. It also enables students to grapple with their own identity in relation to larger issues of structural inequality, power, privilege, and oppression. This opportunity to grapple with one's identity is exceptionally important, as it is an essential part of becoming socially aware. According to Piacitelli et al. (2013), the intensity of an immersion experience increases the likelihood that participants will transfer their on-site experience back to their own communities, academic work, and career plans (p. 91). In light of this, international alternative breaks inherently possess a strength in that the immersion experience is typically rather intense because of the nature of international service.

### **Dangers of International Alternative Breaks without Critical Reflection**

It is understood that the process of reflection presents the key to harnessing the capacity of ISL to generate significant learning and service outcomes, and if reflection is student led there is a risk that they may not be prepared to unlock this potential. If the potential for reflection remains untapped, and experience is the sole teacher, multiple issues can occur. As noted by Whitney and Clayton (2011), “despite the oft-cited maxim that

‘experience is the best teacher,’ we know that experience alone is, in fact, an incomplete and problematic teacher” (p.150). When reflection is weak, students’ learning may be “haphazard, accidental, and superficial” (Stanton, 1990, p.185); or, students may describe their learning outcomes vaguely with phrases such as “I learned a lot,” or “I got so much out of my experience” (Ash & Clayton, 2004). In an alternative break program setting, the greatest danger is that without strong critical reflection, students may tend to erroneously believe that they have seen, and thus fully *understand*, the complexities of the country and community they have visited (Whitney & Clayton, 2011).

Without well-crafted and intentionally designed critical reflection, service-learning can all too easily lead to reinforced stereotypes, simplistic solutions to complex problems, and inaccurate generalizations from limited knowledge (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Conrad & Hedin, 1990; Dewey, 1910; Stanton, 1990; Strand, 1999) A lack of quality reflection becomes a heightened issue in the international arena because it is meant to serve as a necessary safeguard against some of the problematic potential outcomes associated with students being directly involved in communities with which they are unfamiliar. These outcomes can include, but are not limited to, the misinterpretations of the motives and behaviors of others and the tendency to make inadequately informed judgments across cultural differences (Whitney & Clayton, 2011).

### **Models and Principles of Reflection**

The type and amount of reflection activities that are used to connect the service experience to the learning objectives of a service-learning course have an impact on its efficacy (Eyler, 2001). Mabry (1998) assessed how specific student learning outcomes were related to course variables in service-learning courses. These course variables included

frequency and variety of written reflection activities. Students enrolled in service-learning classes completed pre- and post-test surveys on their values and attitudes. Results from Mabry's study suggested that service-learning had a positive outcome on values and attitudes when students participated in weekly (this would translate to daily in an alternative break program) in-class reflection, completed ongoing and summative written reflection activities, and discussed their service experience with the instructor and community site supervisor. When students participated in both a form of ongoing reflection, such as journaling, as well as summative reflection, such as a final paper or presentation, they demonstrated higher gains in personal social values and civic attitudes than students who participated in one or the other.

One has to wonder if all Peer Leaders become deeply familiar with different respected models of reflection before they set out to create and facilitate reflections in their groups. Eyler and Giles (1999) coined the "Five C's" of quality reflection: connection, continuity, context, challenge, and coaching (Mills, 2001). "Connection" is achieved by reflective activities that discourage compartmentalizing experience and knowledge, and encouraging students to see the connectedness of every aspect of their service-learning experience. "Continuity" is characterized by a flow of reflective activities that take place before, during, and after service experience. "Context" refers to the practice of using reflective activities that encourage applying specific subject matter to real problems. "Challenge" says that reflective activities should challenge students' pre-service perspectives while remaining sensitive to student needs. Finally, "coaching" is a call to leaders of reflection to use reflective activities that incorporate emotional and intellectual support for students or participants as they are growing through the experience.



Bringle and Hatcher (1999) offer another set of guidelines for designing effective reflection by positing that reflection activities should (a) clearly link the service experience to the course content and learning objectives; (b) be structured in terms of description, expectations, and the criteria for assessing the activity; (c) occur regularly so that students can develop the capacity to engage in deeper and broader examination of issues; (d) provide feedback from the instructor so that students learn how to improve their critical analysis and reflective practice; and (e) include the opportunity for students to explore, clarify, and alter their personal values. Structuring reflection with clear expectations and criteria for assessment is also a distinctive aspect of the Bringle and Hatcher guidelines. Both of these sets of guidelines for reflection are similar in that they both emphasize the need for regularity, connecting reflection to the course content, providing feedback and coaching, and challenging the clarification of values.

Not all students of reflection see the process as being so amenable to structure or methodology. These thinkers find there are some philosophical considerations related to reflection that are not given to easy pedagogical, formulaic answers. Liu (1995) is a Rortian pragmatic thinker, contrary to the many service-learning professionals who draw from Dewey's pragmatism. Rortian thought says that knowledge is derived from what it is collectively agreed upon, through a democratic process. Rortian thinkers, like Liu, disagree that thinking retroactively upon an experience is a means of true reflection because it cannot produce changes in the way we think the world is constructed. Reflection happens through discourse, not in internalized, personalized thinking. Rortian pragmatism centers epistemic concerns on "how well knowledge claims to... 'work' in particular contexts, for particular

people with particular purposes” (Liu, 1995, p.12). For Liu, having a set of service-learning “objectives,” or assigning written personal reflection pieces, misses the point of pragmatism.

Dewey has frequently been cited as a founding father of service-learning. However, Maddux and Donnett (2015) argue that the way we approach service-learning, and specifically reflection, today does not truly represent Deweyan pragmatism. They have found that writing about reflection is often purely a discussion of models for the conduct of reflection, or the types of reflection tools utilized, with little consideration of how such tools relate to the conduct of pragmatic thought (Maddux & Donnett, 2015). Reflection is meant to begin with disturbance, and if we are to take Dewey seriously reflection cannot begin with “a student merely relating a description of the disquiet that follows upon an experience” (Maddux & Donnett, 2015, p. 71). However, in my experience, this is common in international service-learning reflection activities.

In all cases, the literature does agree that simply asking students “What was your high and low of today?” and hoping that a conversation sparks from this prompting is not an acceptable form of reflection, but unfortunately, it seems to be rather common in an international alternative break setting. I have participated in literal candle passing “reflections” and I can confidently say that I was not challenged to clarify my values, nor did the candle pass connect to the coursework in any substantial way. Peer Leaders are first and foremost students who have lives that exist outside of leading these programs. It can seem appealing as a Peer Leader to save time and do the bare minimum in terms of planning reflection and relying on the participants to talk about their emotions; herein the danger lies. Models of reflection have been tested and provide results. If students lean too heavily into the student-programming mentality, relying on team building and experiences, rather than

implementing models of reflection, they can miss out on encouraging their participants to achieve actual goals of learning and growing.

#### **Chapter 4: The Transformational Nature of Alternative Breaks**

A primary concern of many academics when it comes to international alternative break programs is the amount of actual learning that happens through pre-departure classes, time in country, and the re-entry processes. It seems as though there are two disagreeing schools of thought. The student programming focused mentality emphasizes the transformational nature of these programs, where students are asked to look at themselves and the world in a new way. The academic mentality that is often critical of these breaks poses the question, “where is the learning?” However, perhaps there need not be such isolated and polarized views of these programs.

Although intellectual growth stimulated by academic rigor is much more subject to the particular institution’s alternative break program model, personal growth is almost inherently a part of the alternative break movement as it attempts to encourage a journey towards active citizenship. There is a middle ground between academic quality and transformative power, I contend, that exists when Learning Partners mentor Peer Leaders properly and intentionally create courses that, like any other, have concrete learning objectives to be met in class and on program. This transformative power that alternative breaks are believed to possess must be critically examined if alternative breakers are to be able to defend the legitimacy of the programs when facing those who doubt that short-term international service can have any real, lasting effect on participants.

#### **Transformation**

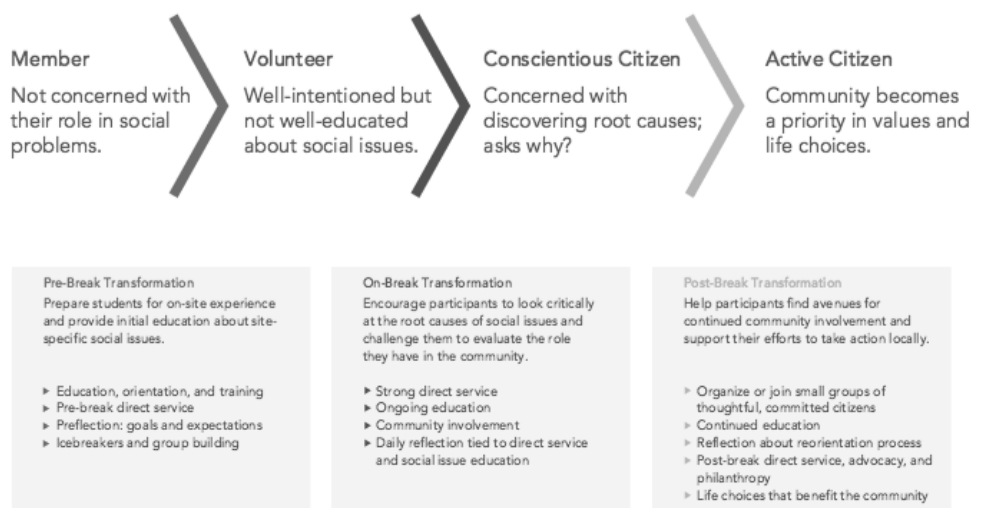
An appropriate lens with which to view this journey towards the “active citizenship” that is championed by alternative breaks is Mezirow’s transformational learning theory. A foundational part of Mezirow’s theory is the notion of perspective transformation, which he defines as:

The process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting on these new understandings. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 14)

Transformational learning is defined by Clark (1993) as, “learning that induces more far-reaching change in the learner than other kinds of learning, especially learning experiences which shape the learner and produce a significant impact, or paradigm shift, which affects the learner's subsequent experiences” (p. 47). She goes on to say, “in short, transformational learning *shapes* people; they are different afterward in ways both they and others can recognize” (Clark, 1993, p.47). This is the type of change that Break Away is attempting to foster through the Active Citizen Continuum.

The active citizen concept (Fig. 1) is a fundamental part of the alternative break movement. It is the standardized model that many

**Figure 1 The Active Citizen Continuum**



different institutions that fall under the leadership of Break Away use to create a visual image of the journey that students are encouraged to take through their alternative break experience. The active citizen will become critically aware of his or her own presuppositions about the world, reformulate their assumptions as a result of experience, and then ideally act differently upon gaining their new perspectives.

Kiely (2004) reports his findings from a longitudinal case study meant to investigate how students experience perspective transformation from their participation in international service-learning programs that have an explicit social justice orientation. His findings indicate that each student evaluated experienced significant changes in their world-view in at least one of six different dimensions: political, moral, intellectual, personal, spiritual, and cultural. The study also found that students who initially expressed a willingness to change their lifestyle or vocation for the advancement of social justice experienced “ongoing conflict and struggle in their attempts to translate their critical awareness into meaningful action” (p.5).

This ongoing conflict and struggle is representative of the longevity of the effect that can be had on a student after participating in an alternative break experience. The experience should not end when the student returns to school, and the social justice oriented instruction should be strong enough to sustain that experience. The term “alternative break” becomes almost inaccurate when we view the experience in this way because the emphasis is on the break, or the week of service itself, when in reality the emphasis should be put on the service *experience* in its entirety. For this reason, Appalachian State University made the decision to rebrand their program as “Alternative Service Experience” to highlight the longitudinal aspect.

Eyler and Giles (1999) claim that service-learning practitioners tend to encourage transformational learning by supporting an education that “raises fundamental questions and empowers students to do something about them” (p. 133). They say that service-learning as a transformational learning process is “not about accumulating more knowledge, but about seeing the world in a profoundly different way, one that calls for personal commitment and action” (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p.129). This ability to see the world in a different way and then act upon it is essential to the identity of the active citizen. The active citizen chooses to make community “a priority in values and life choices” (Break Away, n.d.) based on their new perspectives.

Another part of the transformation associated with international alternative breaks is the process of intercultural competency. Taylor (1994) once again agrees that transformation in intercultural competency “requires the sojourner to look at his or her world from a different point of view- a perspective of the world that is often in conflict with personal values and beliefs” (p. 155). Attempting to improve the participant’s intercultural competency is a necessary component of the commitment to social justice education that alternative break programs are founded upon. This idea that a new perspective is vital to the transformational learning of the participant appears time and time again in the literature.

When students begin to take on the perspectives of others, opportunities for better understanding of complex social issues and empathy for different cultures become attainable. Those who are successful at working through and learning from the experiences that stem from international travel have the potential to become “interculturally competent within the host culture, developing a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective”

(Mezirow, 1991, p. 167). A perspective that is inclusive, discriminating, and integrative is one that should be strived for in any quality international alternative break experience.

The process of intercultural competency itself is also intrinsically transformational, it is a learning and growing process where a student's "' old' person breaks up and the intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral capacities construct a 'new' person at a higher level of integration" (Kim & Ruben, 1988, p. 314). This is the reason that so many students come back from these programs saying they feel like a "new person." However, it is important to note that truly returning home changed person cannot be achieved through surface level reflection where all participants can say is that they've "grown;" no, it must go much deeper than that.

### **The Effect of Peer Leadership on Transformational Learning**

The research on short-term immersion programs, either through alternative breaks or short-term study abroad is in general limited (Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, Ireland, Niehaus, & Skendall, 2012), and the research on peer leadership through these programs is even more limited. An exploration of the effect of peer leadership on the transformational aspect of international alternative breaks requires a study of both transformational learning theories and peer leadership in higher education, and inference and extrapolation from each body of literature. Further research opportunities in this area are abundant and a great deal could be added to the professional knowledge of service-learning and international alternative break programs by conducting a study that looks at peer leadership from the point of view of students, faculty, and program coordinators.

The opportunity to develop community among students who are historically underrepresented or considered "at risk" in higher education is a benefit to peer leadership

(Shook & Keup, 2012). If a first generation college student coming from a lower socioeconomic status family participates in an international alternative break program, he or she may have difficulty reconciling the poverty that he or she sees in another country in comparison to the poverty that her or she has experienced. This student could benefit from having a relationship with an older student who wants to talk through these issues and support the student as they process the experience. A degree of confidence could be achieved for a student who is considered at risk to see that an upperclassman is taking interest in him or her; this confidence would be a protective factor as the student asks difficult questions and experiences perspective shifts.

When students return home from an international alternative break, they may need assistance finding resources to help them make the changes to their everyday lives that they have decided to make. As previously mentioned (see Chapter 1), if they are trained properly and made aware of the resources that are available to participants following the alternative break experience, Peer Leaders can continue their relationships with participants and assist them with the re-entry process. A Peer Leader is able to empathize and interact with participants, in a way that perhaps a faculty leader could not, because of their shared experience as a student, and as a result of that shared experience, their relationship does not have to alter greatly upon returning home. They can remain a resource and a support system throughout a participant's transformational experience.

### **Implications for International Alternative Break Programs**

Student affairs and service-learning have two distinctive bodies of literature that can appear to be working at cross purposes. However, a point can be reached where the values of each professional body remain in tact and can work in tandem. The key to reaching this point



is relying heavily on the Learning Partner whom is involved in the international alternative break. This Learning Partner should, presumably, have experience teaching and creating course curriculum. The Peer Leaders should be able to take the lead when it comes to teambuilding, but they could benefit from the Learning Partner's expertise as an educator. Both parties bring different skill sets and abilities to the pre-departure classes as well as time in country, but both must be brought to their full potential in order to achieve an alternative break program that is both transformational as well as educational for participants. The two must be trained together in order to reach this potential.

Looking at the model of international alternative break programs, it would be wise to consider *why* programs are offered for academic credit, and whether or not they warrant such credit. If these programs are crafted in a way that encourages high academic standards in pre-departure classes, then offering course credit is appropriate. However, if two undergraduate students create the class curriculum at a level that is not comparable to that of another service-learning class on the university campus, it may not be appropriate to offer such credit. If we determine that academic credit is not warranted, then the value of the program shifts to be more primarily focused on perspective shifts and changed worldviews, which could be the more natural fit.

Further research is needed to be able to accurately decide which of these models is more appropriate, credit or no-credit. Research meant to gain the perspective of academics in the fields of social work, global studies, service-learning, and other applicable fields should be pursued in order to inform this decision. The perspective of student participants on these programs also needs to be further researched, particularly focusing on their perceptions of peer leadership. As a Peer Leader, I know that a best practices guide to international

alternative break programs for student leaders would be an excellent resource. However, it would be important to bring together student affairs professionals and service-learning professionals to create the guide so that it is not biased towards either, but instead incorporates knowledge and skills that each field has to offer.

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