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Emily M. Neer  
*Virginia Tech*

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## **Meaningful International Service Learning Experiences: Looking at the Reciprocal Nature of Reflection and Group Connection**

Emily M. Neer  
Virginia Tech  
Critical Reflection on Engagement

### **Abstract**

International service learning trips can provide meaningful and deep experiences where students are impacted and challenged by these experiences. In order to maximize the experience, one must understand the reciprocal relationship between reflection and group connection. In this critical reflection I will explore the ways in which reflection and group connection reciprocate each other in an international service-learning context. I discuss three concepts that I believe play crucial roles in this reciprocal relationship and their roles in three different contexts of the service immersion experience. These three concepts are reflection, stability, and vulnerability. They are explained within the contexts of pre-trip reflection, self reflection, and group reflection. By bringing this relationship and its components to the attention of civically engaged faculty, students, and leaders we can work to create more challenging and meaningful service immersion experiences.

*Keywords:* reflection, international service immersion, group connection

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Correspondence concerning this paper can be sent to Emily Neer, 800 Drillfield Drive, 113 Burruss Hall (0168), Blacksburg, VA 24061. Address email to emilyn16@vt.edu.

## **Meaningful International Service Learning Experiences: Looking at the Reciprocal Nature of Reflection and Group Connection**

I looked around at my group of sixteen. They were all chatting happily as my co-leader and I tried to gather them for nightly group reflection. I could tell they were exhausted from a long day of work out in the intense and direct sun, but the energy in the room still could not be suppressed. An overwhelming feeling of pride came over me as I gathered the group in a circle so we could reflect on our day. I was proud of my group's perseverance, inclusiveness, open-mindedness, and thirst for knowledge and connection. Not only were we making a small difference in a rural community in the Dominican Republic, we were creating amazing, authentic and indescribable bonds with each other.

This personal reflection came from the journal I had kept during our spring break service immersion trip to the Dominican Republic. It is one of the entries that inspired me to look more closely into the elements of group connection and reflection and how they reciprocate one another. What I am interested in is the how. How do we create these meaningful, challenging, and inspiring service-learning experiences by studying the interaction between reflection and group connection? What are some of the elements of group connection in an international service context and how do we facilitate these strong bonds that arise between participants? I will look more closely into these elements to address how these experiences can be created.

International service immersion trips are important as they engage students in service and reflective experiences in a culture often different from their own. As a leader, planning for these trips is a major undertaking. Aside from making sure we all get through security and customs in the airports without challenges, one of the most important roles we play as leaders centers on group reflection. Like with all service learning programs and curriculums, reflection is a key to transforming service into an educational and meaningful experience. According to John Dewey (1933), reflection is an "active persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to

which it tends” (p. 6). Reflection is how we make meaning of our experiences. On the trip I led, I noticed a reciprocal relationship between reflection and group connection. In order to have deep and meaningful reflection, students needed to feel truly connected with one another. In addition, reflection facilitated and prompted this true connection.

Over Virginia Tech’s spring break of 2014, I led fourteen other students and two staff members on a service immersion trip to El Cerrito, Dominican Republic, a rural community on the eastern side of the country. The community members harvest the miles of sugarcane that surround their homes. They live in conditions with no running water or electricity. Consequently, community members are forced to walk, some for many miles, to get water from the river. This contaminated and dirty river is their only water source and drinking from it would make them sick. Our projects for the week were to install water filters in homes and plant vegetable gardens. We also worked on constructing a community baseball field for the youth baseball league. I wanted my group to be challenged by this experience to connect both within the group and with the community members, to think from a global perspective, to discover new knowledge, and to find personal growth. It was a challenging, but life changing week full of tough physical labor, deep connections within our group and with the community, and stories that turned into memories that will last a lifetime.

I will explore the reciprocal relationship of reflection and connection through the lens of international service immersion by first delving into the *purpose of reflection*, and the *role reflection plays before and during the trip*. I will then explain how the process of stability and feelings of vulnerability, *two crucial components of connection*, shape and are consequently shaped by reflection. This relationship needs to be addressed in the service learning community because the way students interact with one another significantly shapes the impact of reflection

throughout the entire service immersion experience. By bringing this relationship and its components to the attention of civically engaged faculty, students, and leaders we can work to create more challenging and meaningful service immersion experiences. The paper is organized by concepts and contexts. I will be exploring the concepts (main headings) reflection, stability, and vulnerability in different contexts. The contexts (subheadings) pre- trip reflection, self reflection, and group reflection are where I will discuss the above stated concepts. It is important for trip leaders to have an understanding of these different elements of group connection in different settings.

### **Reflection**

The act of reflecting is crucial to how we learn, interpret, and react to every day interactions and situations. Reflection is thinking about our experiences through a critical lens. This can be done in many different settings (e.g. self or facilitated reflection) and in many different ways (e.g. organized activities or journaling). Relating to service, reflection needs to be present and executed efficiently in order for the experience to be thoroughly impactful. Without reflection, our service trips would lack meaning and insight. Margaret Wheatley (2007) urges us to reflect often when she states, “Without such reflection, we go blindly on our way, ignoring the learnings and creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful” (p. 208). Pairing reflection with service creates the educational component of the experience that has the potential to inspire us, expand our knowledge, and help our communities. Without reflection we would not be the people we are today: the people shaped by our experiences.

Reflection is an outlet that allows participants to think about difficult questions such as questions of inequality, social change, and personal growth. The outcomes of reflection may answer some questions, but it also may raise more. On our trip we ran into this situation quite

frequently. Students were challenged and oftentimes frustrated by the never-ending questions that did not always have clear answers. For example, many students struggled with the apparent inequality across cultures and communities. The outcome of reflection may never be fully satisfying, but in my opinion that is the beauty of it. We place a large emphasis on reflection during our trip, as it is a medium for students to challenge themselves and learn from their experiences.

### **Pre-Trip Reflection**

My co-leader and I incorporated reflection from the very beginning to try to ease students into the reflective mindset we expected on the trip. We first introduced the group to reflection during our pre-trip meetings. Pre-trip meetings are a crucial part of the immersion experience as they acquaint participants with each other, explain trip logistics and purpose, and introduce reflection. It has been shown that group connection even starts to form here in the pre-trip meetings. According to a study on service immersion experiences, “Participants reported that the preparatory group sessions enabled the formation of ‘bonds before the trip [which] created a positive group dynamic’ that included ‘mutual respect, acceptance of differences, and a desire to learn from one another’” (Gumpert & Kraybill- Greggo, 2005, p. 18). Pre-trip meetings consisted of facilitating an icebreaker activity to familiarize participants with each other, covering announcements and any travel detail, and introducing a structured reflection activity. An effective way to introduce reflection in pre-trip meetings is to have the group conduct research on the social issue the trip will focus on such as food insecurity. Students can research a certain subject area within the social issue and present and discuss this information with the group. It holds true that students learn from one another even before the trip begins. Peer learning is important as students learn from each other by “explaining their ideas to others and participating

in activities in where they can learn from their peers” (Boud, 2001, p. 3). After sharing the research that was collected, conduct a brief reflection on the information learned. Asking thought-provoking questions like *How will we be able to make an impact? Why should we be aware of these issues before we go into the community? What would it look like if we were not aware?* are questions to jumpstart this reflective thinking. Even though these pre-trip reflections barely scratched the surface of the depth of reflection that we had on our trip because they lack the experiential component, it was important to expose students who were unfamiliar with reflection to this mindset. This allows them to draw on what they have learned in these meetings and apply this knowledge while on the trip. It also sets up the reflective expectation of the trip.

### **Self Reflection**

Setting forth the reflective expectation motivates students to not just actively serve, but actively reflect as well. Active reflecting is happening continuously at all points of the day as students are trying to understand the community around them and their role in this community during the week and beyond. Hopefully, the reflective expectation of the trip propelled students to notice things they would have never thought to notice before. Students were individually reflecting as they worked through the conversations they had with one another. Informal conversation like discussing different elements of our work was helping students to process through their thoughts and feelings. For example, when we were working on the water filter project, students first had to learn how to construct the water filter. As we were installing them in homes, students had to teach the family how to maintain the system so it would work for many years to come. Students actively tried to get to know the families and understand the living situations of these families as they worked together. I remember being in one house made of corrugated tin. It was a one-room house with no doors or windows. Students were taken aback by

the state of the house and many students asked our guide about the conditions the family lived in. *How many people live here? How far do they have to walk to get water?* Students were curious and eager to learn about the family situation and reflect back on how our efforts were helping to make a difference in the life of this family.

### **Group Reflection**

This one particular night at reflection, Emily and I had wanted to bring up the balance between a service trip and an immersion trip. We had noticed some participants had a mentality of “do more” and seemed disappointed when the work ran out or others did not share that drive. While this enthusiasm is important, it’s equally as important to appreciate where they’re at and who they’re around... Emily and I had points we wanted to stress, but like I mentioned before, we let them come to their own conclusions. And they did! For me, that was so rewarding. It must be how educators feel when the light bulb finally goes off for a student and they understand. The conclusions were similar to points we had wanted to stress, but when the group can come to those conclusions themselves instead of Emily or I just telling them, it makes it more impactful. (K. Stakes, personal communication, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014)

The above reflection by my co-leader provides insight into how we approached group reflection on the trip. We made sure to develop an environment that promoted unstructured reflection. We were intentional about not persuading students into thinking how we wanted them to think, but rather allowed them to come to their own conclusions while we stood by to offer support if needed. Group reflection is crucial as it brings the group together in the evening to be able to unpack the day’s events, emotions, and thoughts that arise throughout. After dinner and a couple of hours to relax, we would hold group reflection in the common area of where we stayed. Student’s perspectives were challenged in a supportive and safe space as they brought up their observations, thoughts, and emotions. My co-leader and I approached group reflection as a continuation of the day; a reflection that takes what people have been processing and working through during their day and brings it together in the group. As leaders we can begin to structure group reflection based on the conversations we have with our participants as well as what we

notice about their actions and reactions to certain events throughout the day. Reflection in any form is directly influenced by interpersonal relationships.

### **Stability**

Stability is a process every student works through during the entire course of the service immersion experience. Stability includes the elements of destabilization and re-stabilization. Working through this imbalance is similar to the process a new college student works through when adjusting to college life. Students are out of their comfort zones when they first come to a campus surrounded by new people and living in a new environment. They begin to re-stabilize when they go and seek new friendships and support with either people in their residence halls, in their classes, or in organizations and clubs they join. They seek the support in order to make the most of their college experience. Destabilization on an international service immersion trip is caused by many different elements of the group that manifests in certain ways during pre-trip meetings and while on the trip. Students being pushed out of their comfort zones, cultural differences between the community we are serving and our own, and minimal access to technology are a few examples. Destabilization enables group connection because in order to re-stabilize we begin to depend on one another. We build ourselves back up by expanding our comfort zones and going through this international service experience together. Reflection plays a role in this process for as we are processing our situation individually and with each other, we are re-stabilizing together and forming trust and connection.

### **Pre-Trip Reflection**

Pre-trip meetings serve as a place where destabilization is first felt. The uncertainty of the trip along with the unfamiliarity with each other in our own group played into this destabilization. We needed to build trust with one another and establish a foundation in order to

start our trip off successfully. Establishing this foundation is known as the second part of the process, re-stabilization. Weekly pre-trip meetings, in general, work to break down the unknowns of the trip and the unfamiliarity with each other. Playing icebreaker games helps to familiarize participants with one another and build group connection from the very beginning.

### **Self Reflection**

Prior going to the DR I was quite nervous, I did not know what to expect, I merely knew a handful of words in Spanish, and I had had little interaction with the group I was going on the trip with. I felt out of place, uncomfortable, and more than nervous, terrified. However, I knew that this was something I wanted to do; I had something pushing me to really go out of my comfort zone and somehow give back. (A. Yang, personal communication, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014)

This reflection from one of my participants clearly demonstrates the concerns and uneasy feelings many students have before the trip. Students are undoubtedly thrown out of their comfort zone on an international service immersion trip. This starts when travelling with a large group of people they do not truly know yet. While on the trip, serving in a community with a different culture destabilized us as well. This manifested in ways as simple as sleeping with lizards and frogs in our rooms at night to the difference in the work ethic and religious values community members hold. We were coming into their culture with some knowledge, but not enough to where we could fully understand their every day lives. These cultural differences were prevalent when we were introduced to the community. On our first day in the country we were known as the Americans and the “gringos” and “gringas.” Many students were a little bothered by how we were perceived and the terminology that was used. Some of my participants were ashamed of the items we possessed and how we were perceived because of our nationality. I know that students actively reflected to make sense of these challenges that arose throughout the day. In order to re-stabilize, conversation and asking difficult questions of one another were

techniques used by students to process their experiences together. *How are we making a difference? Is the physical labor that I put into these projects the only aspect of the trip that matters? How do my experiences in the Dominican Republic influence the actions I take at home? How has this trip changed my view of the world, service and myself?* Questions like these were asked of each other as we personally tried to understand the significance of the trip. We became closer as group as we listened to each other's past personal stories, opinions, and even frustrations.

De-stabilization also occurred during our free time. An overlooked aspect of destabilization is the minimal access to technology on the trip. During the day, students did not have access to their phones and internet access was limited. My co-leader and I tried to keep technology to a minimum on our trip, and it definitely created a different pace of life. It was refreshing to see how we could completely dive into service and reflection without distraction of phone calls and texts demanding our attention. We were able to focus completely on our acts of service and reflection. And when we weren't able to call home every night we learned quickly to rely on each other. During our free time, many students would go swimming, journal next to each other, have conversations, play cards, or go explore around the property where we stayed. We relied on each other rather than the people back home. We relied on our similar passions and drive to serve others and the curiosity to learn. This is how we re-stabilized. We leaned on one another while also serving as a solid foundation for someone else.

### **Group Reflection**

Facilitated reflection at night with the entire group is when we brought all of our experiences from our day together. Elements from our day that destabilized us such as the cultural differences and the language barrier were carried over into the group-facilitated

reflection as we tried to reflect together to overcome this destabilization. The group felt this destabilization, when we would discuss issues such as feeling guilty for the expectations that came from being perceived as an American and trying to find the answer on how to handle this perception. Finding a balance in this thinking is something I am still trying to process today, but I believe exploring conversations like these helped to bring the group closer together. It is important to realize that we did not come to a definitive conclusion. The mere process of working through the challenges of destabilization brought us closer together.

### **Vulnerability**

Stability is one aspect of group connection, but we cannot overlook vulnerability. Brené Brown, a researcher on vulnerability, defines vulnerability as allowing oneself to be truly and clearly seen. It is at the core, the heart, and the center of meaningful human experiences (Brown, 2012). Vulnerability on our trip manifested in many ways. Once our participants felt that they could trust one another they were more willing to open up and tell their stories. We wanted to further break down the barriers and really connect with one another. Embracing this vulnerability as a leader and encouraging students when they are showing vulnerability are ways that deeper connections and reflection are developed.

### **Pre-Trip Reflection**

Pre-trip meetings helped to establish the foundation for vulnerability and building relationships. In pre-trip meetings we used icebreakers to familiarize participants with each other, but reflection activities served to set group norms while setting the foundation for vulnerable conversation. One activity we had students engage in was reading a short poem and taking the themes of the poem and connecting them to what we could potentially experience or see while in the Dominican Republic. Students also reflected in another activity where they had

to respond to a word or a picture relating to international service and poverty. Students told stories, shared quotes, or offered their opinions as we discussed the word or picture. When we engaged in a reflection in a pre-trip meeting, we were identifying the reflective expectation we wanted on the trip. We began to establish that safe space in order for students to feel they could be vulnerable with each other. Establishing safe space begins with getting to know one another with fun as well as introspective icebreakers. Informal conversation between students during pre-trip meetings is also effective in helping students build connection and trust.

### **Self Reflection**

Vulnerability in self-reflection was seen in many ways throughout the day. The most noticeable action that required vulnerability on our trip was when we were trying to overcome the language barrier. A majority of students did not know how to speak much Spanish, if any at all. Some students would often feel inadequate or even guilty if they could not communicate with community members, but we quickly found that we could help one another in our attempts to communicate. We would try and help each other work through broken Spanish in order to create a connection with our Spanish-speaking friends. Even though this seems like a small detail, we connected with each other, as we were able to help each other. Brown (2012) states in her book, “I also learned that the people... I really depend on, were never the critics who were pointing at me as I stumbled. They weren’t in the bleachers at all. They were with me in the arena” (p. 56). The support we received gave us the courage to make the attempt to communicate. It was amazing to see these interactions happening as a bond was formed on the individual level. Sanford (1966) has found that the amount of support that a student receives is correlated with the amount of challenge that the student actively seeks. All these individual connections throughout the trip served as building blocks for stronger group connection. The following quote from one

of my participants attests to how students broke the barriers to communicate with community members.

When Carlos, our translator, and I first met, we instantly connected on our idealistic notions on service, faith, and happiness being at the core of a life worth living. We had many conversations about a variety of topics that brought us closer but the one that startled me was when we talked about our futures... He had already reached the fulfillment he had hoped for, there was no more steps on the proverbial “success ladder” he felt he needed to climb... Where I come from, everyone is looking towards the future—both for themselves and their families. There is this idea that staying in one place is akin to stagnancy rather than satisfaction. Carlos does not have materialistic wealth by any means but he has the wealth of character and happiness that can only come from a life dedicated to service. I brought back with me a consciousness of all the blessings and opportunities that I have that help me serve the people I care about. (S. Thahir, personal communication, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2014)

### **Group Reflection**

During group reflection we had the chance to exercise vulnerability. We became more vulnerable with our emotions rather than our actions. It was a time where we drew connections from past events in our lives to the service work we were doing and the people that we met. It was where we connected and challenged our values and beliefs. It was a judgment-free space where we shared personal stories. The space for vulnerability is established in many different ways beginning with building group connection from the first group meeting before the trip. Pre-trip meetings serve as a place where participants first get to know one another. While on the trip do not be afraid to ask difficult questions of the participants. For example, questions that relate to their views on impact and their motivation to serve would propel participants to reflect more deeply. Listen as they share their thoughts and stories and respond with support or even respectfully challenge their views. Participants will begin to trust and open up to one another as the trip progresses. Do not force vulnerability, but allow it to naturally develop as participants connect and get to know one another over the course of the week.

One night a student opened up to everyone during group reflection. Tears were shed as her personal story was told. The overwhelming support she received as she told her story and after the reflection was truly amazing to witness. This is vulnerability at its core. “We simply can’t learn to be more vulnerable and courageous on our own. Sometimes our first and greatest challenge is asking for support” (Brown, 2012, p. 56). This participant did not explicitly ask for the group’s support, but that is what she needed. She received that support so easily and this would have not had happened without the power of group reflection and the connection that existed within the group. Once we had built the trust with one another to get to this point, vulnerability in reflection had a powerful impact on the depth and meaning of this conversation. I have found that most students on the trip were willing to embrace vulnerability and help others through the difficult questions that arose when they felt truly connected.

### **Conclusion**

The reciprocal relationship of reflection and group connection is a relationship that cannot be ignored. In order for us to create meaningful international service immersion experiences we need to be aware of this relationship. If we are intentional in fostering this relationship we will maximize the overall experience and hopefully leave a lasting impact with students. To accomplish this we need to be aware of the purpose of reflection and understand how students make meaning of their experiences. We need to identify when students are reflecting and encourage this reflection not only in the facilitated context, but throughout the day as well. Making sure that reflection is introduced during pre-trip meetings or through some other medium is a great way for students to be exposed to the act of reflecting. It sets the expectation and enhances reflection throughout the trip. We also need to be aware of stability and the feelings of vulnerability that arise among students. Recognizing and embracing these two

elements of group connection will promote the connection formed among students and deepen reflection even more. Reflection encourages closer group connection and in return group connection deepens reflection. Because of this dynamic, meaningful international service immersion experiences have the potential to leave a lasting impact on students.

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