

The Lessons of Anapra: International Service Learning and Character Education

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When people ask me how I spent Winter Term, 1999, I try to keep it simple: ‘I traveled with 15 students to Mexico. We flew to El Paso, rented vans, drove across the border and lived in the heart of the *colonia* for a month.’ While this brief explanation provides the structure for understanding our Winter Term in Service trip, it in no way addresses the depth, complexity, and life-changing qualities of this extraordinary experience.

Like others before us, we came to Anapra—a community of great poverty and physical need—expecting to transform it. We found, instead, that Anapra transformed us. We learned much about ourselves; our complicity in a global system of economic inequity; and the tangible presence of peace, faith, hope, and community. We learned to live with less, to appreciate more, and to depend upon one another. It was hard to come home. Glenda Balas, DePauw University, *Final Report, Anapra 1999*

This article describes an international service learning course I developed in 1999 for a group of 18 undergraduate students at DePauw University. This month-long border studies tour to Anapra, Mexico, was my first service learning experience in teaching. Its lessons have framed my community-based teaching in the years since and have given me concepts and courage to design similar projects in Juarez, Mexico; Thika, Kenya; and Albuquerque’s south valley. Commitments to global inclusion, experiential compassion, and engaged reflection—as well as reciprocity of service and a multidisciplinary approach to academic preparation—have been important and guiding principles for me in designing local, regional, and international service learning projects over the last seven years. I have found that this five-pronged model offers a conceptual frame appropriate for varied and diverse service experiences in the field, from a medical clinic in rural Africa to an urban elementary school in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

I offer this model of service learning instruction, as well as a narrative account of our experiences in Mexico, in hopes that they will inspire others to develop similar field-based and community-oriented experiences for their students. I am particularly interested in providing information for teachers whose institutions lack an infrastructure of support for international service learning. In this article, I discuss the course goals, on-site activities, and learning outcomes of the Anapra experience. I also provide a course assessment guide based on the core character-building components of the course. My purposes in writing this article are not only to

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enlarge the service learning literature by describing the course design of a successful international service learning course, but also to demonstrate important theoretical and practical linkages between character education and an ethic of care in the development of service learning experiences.

Linkages of Character and Care

Character Education

The task of developing moral character in youth has interested philosophers and educators for centuries. As early as the fourth century B.C., Aristotle addressed the need for character education, arguing that virtue was not an innate characteristic of humans, but rather an attribute that had to be learned (Aristotle, trans. 1980). Many contemporary scholars and educators have taken a similar stance, calling upon schools and communities to develop character education programs that are comprehensive and systematic approaches for teaching self respect, ethics, perseverance, and personal development (Hixson, Gholar, & Riggs, 1996). Similarly, the Character Education Partnership proposed broad and deliberate community-wide efforts to help young people understand and act upon core ethical values (Schaps & Williams, 1999); and Lickona (1993) argued that character education for youth is essential in building a moral society. Writing in 1987, Peck maintained that character education must be conscious, deliberate, and ongoing, providing the individual with a structure for values reflection.

Other scholars have delineated specifics of what should be taught in character education. In his classic work, *A Place Called School*, Goodlad (2004, 1984) listed goals for schools that included interpersonal understandings, citizenship, and moral and ethical character. In the years since, others have added to the list, suggesting that character education should also promote respect, responsibility, honesty, empathy, tolerance, compassion, cooperation, self-control, perseverance, and appreciation of diversity. In short, character development has been defined as the growth of those aspects of the individual that represent one's ethical worth, including behavior, cognition, affect, values, personality, and skills that support moral functioning.

Ethic of Care

Several scholars have observed that character education can be seen as ambiguous and subjective, with terms and values dependent upon individual interpretation (Craig, Sep/Oct 1991; DeRoche, 2000). Care, on the other hand, is typically more tangible, related to the tasks, activities, and commitments of one's everyday life. As such, caring can act as an appropriate vehicle—in praxis—for advancing the more abstract, first order cognitive, affective, and behavioral goals of character education. Generally seen as action and practice, rather than a set of rules, the ethic of care requires that people be attentive, responsible, competent, and responsive (Dahle, 1995; Hallstein, 1999; Tronto, 1998). It is founded on mutual respect, compassion, helpfulness, and trust (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2003; Lagana, 2000). The driving force in caring relationships is a desire for the best for the other (Lin, 2001). According to Tronto (1998), individuals' daily and careful judgments about caring allow them to engage in a high moral calling: "Our moral sensibilities will be greatly enhanced if we learn to think more thoughtfully about the morality of everyday life embodied in an ethics of care" (Tronto, 1998).

Situated in an intricate network of relationships and interconnections, the ethic of care is characterized importantly by reciprocity and interdependence among caregivers and care receivers (Nicki, 2002). According to Lagana (2000), care is less about ethical principal than it is about transpersonal exchange and human relationships. In the field of nursing, for example, the caring relationship is seen as a synthesis of the patient's right to autonomous choice and the provider's adherence to the principle of beneficence (Lagana, 2000). Further, elder care

professionals note that while elderly people often receive care, they also dispense it—providing support, not only for themselves, but for friends, families, neighbors, communities, and, importantly, for the caregiver (Tronto, 1998). An ethic of care, then, embraces care as a part of human life, recognizing its role in creating interconnections and relationships of receiving and giving over a lifetime.

Although humans have been caring for one another for thousands of years, the ethic of care was introduced as a theoretical construct by Gilligan (1982), who argued that women have a different moral sensibility than men, motivated primarily by their relationships with others. Gilligan maintained that a virtues-based ethic based not on rules and rights, but rather on care and nurturance, was more appropriate for most females. In recent years, scholars have critiqued Gilligan's notion of gendered and essentialist morality, arguing that the ethic of care should not exclude men or be separated from rationality or the "masculinist" ethic of justice (Hallstein, 1999; Dahle, 1995; Lagana, 2000). Lin (2001), for instance, maintains that a caring-centered society is also a just society, founded on elements of empathy, respect, rights, and protection. Lagana (2000) identifies care and justice as fluid points on the same social continuum; and Watson (1988) suggests that caring for others is an integral part of living equitably in social groups. Shanley (2001) calls for ". . . a well-ordered society. . . that sustains its members, provides them the basis for self-respect, enables them to obtain the means to pursue their conception of the good. . . and acknowledges that society as a whole has a responsibility to provide care for its members." For each of these scholars, caring involves both rational explications of needs and the sympathetic appreciation of emotions. It is a process that can occur in a variety of institutions and settings, stretches across private and public realms, and is based on the notion that as humans, we are never entirely independent, autonomous beings.

Course Description

Anapra, Mexico, is a *colonia* lying on the outskirts of Juarez. Most of the residents of this rapidly-growing community of 18,000 have no water or sewer service. Immigrating from Central America and the interior of Mexico, they have moved to the Texas-Mexico border in hopes of a better life, constructing homes from available resources such as cardboard boxes and packing crates. Illnesses among women and children are especially prevalent. Children lucky enough to go to school have instruction for just three hours each day and typically only through sixth grade.

Backed up against an eight-foot fence delineating the U.S.-Mexico border and patrolled by border police in trucks, on foot, and in helicopters, Anapra sits at the edge of social, economic, and political life. Its streets are largely unpaved, and on windy days, the dirt blows so ferociously that one cannot even see to drive. There are few trees and flowers; those that survive are carefully tended by housewives who water their plants with recycled dishwater at the end of the day. Resources Americans take for granted are at a premium in Anapra. Water is rationed, meat is scarce, and electrical service—unless pirated—is uncommon.

The 1999 trip to Anapra found us living in the heart of this *colonia*, where we worked side by side with local partners and experienced, at least peripherally, the day-to-day routines of the community. Like our neighbors, we took the bus into Juarez to shop for groceries and hauled our water in five-gallon buckets from a community cistern. Our on-site experiences not only introduced us to personal conversations with Anaprans, but also took us to a *maquiladora*, elementary school, domestic abuse shelter, hospital, youth prison, and immigration court. This month-long service learning experience was characterized by strong elements of experiential education, hands-on work with community partners, and reflection. It was specifically designed

to provide insights into issues of sanitation, homelessness, unemployment, immigration, resource shortage, health, and U.S.-Mexico border relations.

This multi-disciplinary service learning course, which sought increased awareness of how we “gaze” upon “others” while “serving,” can be seen as a case study in the moral development of college-aged students. During on-site and post-trip reflection sessions, students not only exhibited enhanced caring capacities, but also articulated cognizance of others’ struggles, power relations between “served” and “serving,” and their own responsibilities to address local and global problems. More than half the team later participated in other domestic and international service learning courses, volunteered for AmeriCorps and Vista, and took positions with service organizations on the Texas-Mexico border. As one student wrote,

My experiences in Anapra have shown me that my life in Indiana has powerful ramifications for people living on the border. Seeing the women doing piece work in the *maquiladora* brought home to me how my comfortable lifestyle in the States is provided by people in the developing world who work very long hours for very low pay. I have to recognize that my purchasing habits contribute to this inequity. (Anonymous, 1999)

The social justice components of the course enhanced its expressive function in a liberal arts curriculum. Our learning objectives (shown below in Figure 1) included increased self-awareness, personal voice, and skills in critical thinking. Students were urged to consider the value of these skills in their varied (and frequently inter-related) academic and community endeavors and to understand the ways in which public eloquence allows one to provide leadership, guidance, and problem-solving contributions in a global environment. The course also emphasized the importance of clear and expressive writing; and students were encouraged to use writing as a tool of invention, connection, and deeper understanding. By writing about their thoughts and hands-on experiences—and by thinking about the writing process—students began to understand how writing could help them become more adept in developing, organizing, and articulating their ideas, which, in turn, made them stronger community leaders.

Clearly, an important learning goal of this course involved developing strategies for strengthening a sense of social justice and community attachment. Students learned that communities abound, if we let them, and oral and written class projects focused on how we sustain commitments and connections to the people in our lives—whether they are members of our class or a *colonia* 1,800 miles away. In sum, this course sought to help students integrate border education with their hands-on experiences in Anapra; to encourage commitments to civic engagement, global awareness, and community change; and to foster self-reflexive approaches to ethical behavior. The chart shown below (Figure 1) was useful to me in designing experiences and activities that supported these course goals. Recognizing that character development was a central objective of the Anapra experience, I developed this instrument as a means of identifying and fleshing out important character issues and the ways they related to the objectives of the course.

Figure 1

CHARACTER ISSUES	COURSE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES
Global awareness, self-reflexivity	Introduction to physical, social, and human environment of the Texas-Mexico border; broadened understanding of the challenges confronting members of this community, particularly residents of the outlying <i>colonias</i> ; ability to self-reflexively confront and examine cultural assumptions about service and the poor
Personal & collective responsibility, ethical behaviors	Increased understanding of moral and ethical implications of one's individual and collective practices, especially in terms of the global community
Agency, problem-solving, leadership skills	Increased sense of self-efficacy; increased skill in group discussion, problem-solving, and analytical thinking; increased deliberative, collaborative, and leadership skills
Communication skills	Increased eloquence in large group, small group, and dyadic communication situations; increased confidence when communicating directly with policy makers, community leaders, and other change agents
Self-awareness, community involvement	Increased self awareness (particularly in understanding personal strengths, career potential, role and responsibility in community improvement)
Personal voice, social conscience	Broadened perceptions of personal voice; enlarged sense of self, identity as an engaged actor in one's communities, and ability to take a stand for just and responsible action
Compassion	Growth as a caring, compassionate, and responsive individual
Interpersonal connections	Genuine interpersonal connections with fellow classmates and members of the Anapran community

Character Education Model

While the value of process-oriented curricula and problem solving in the field is undisputed, thoughtful planning is essential in designing a coherent and successful service learning course. The five-pronged model discussed below developed directly from my hands-on experiences in executing international service learning courses for undergraduate students. It is offered here as a flexible, yet also clearly-defined, guide to course development in a complicated, multi-faceted environment.

Global Inclusion

Roeper (1992) writes that the most important contribution that parents and schools can make toward students' social development is inclusion, creating an environment that keeps young people from feeling they are "on the outside, separated from the world." According to Roeper, we should create an environment that preserves the uniqueness of [students] while also "accepting their integration into the larger global ambience just as the heart is a distinct organ within the body." In a similar vein, research into the education of socially isolated teens has shown that cooperative learning can lead to heightened feelings of competence and enjoyment of school (Mesch, Lew, Johnson, and Johnson, 2001).

Clearly, the Anapra service experience was conducive to development of close ties among students, faculty, and the border community in which we lived. As we settled into a small mission house in the center of the *colonia*, we developed systems of care that allowed students to shop, cook, and clean for one another. Teams of students traveled by bus into Juarez to buy groceries every other day, and everyone cycled through the list of chores that ranged from hauling water from the cistern to washing dishes and sweeping the dirt-packed yard of the compound. Lacking sufficient beds in a structure developed for a team of seven volunteers, we put down sleeping bags each night and slept elbow-to-elbow on the concrete floor. This feeling of solidarity extended to the neighborhood as well. Not only did we work side by side with our community hosts, but we also planned parties for Anapra residents, played games with local children, and fed their dogs. This physical and emotional extension of ourselves to one another and to our neighbors developed a solid sense of dependable community, bringing with it feelings of safety and security.

Academic Multi-Disciplinarity

The pre-trip orientation course was broadly interdisciplinary, focusing on such topics as immigration, housing, trade, health, education, politics, and poverty on the border. This in-class instruction took on new dimensions when we confronted these social conditions first-hand in Anapra. Our visits to immigration court in El Paso, a *maquiladora*, a youth prison, and medical and education facilities in Juarez provided context for our course readings; and our many conversations with Anapra residents opened our eyes to the lived experience of poverty and inequity. Similarly, our fall semester team building exercises (which included retreats, ropes courses, and leadership training) became real when students started working with one another in the field. They learned to solve problems collaboratively, mediate conflict, provide support for each other, and “step up” physically to complete demanding manual tasks. One of the great challenges of completing construction projects in Anapra involved working effectively with limited resources. In one instance, our charge was to paint the interior of a large church sanctuary, using supplies left over from several earlier church projects. Working with four five-gallon containers of widely varying paint colors and a large styrofoam cup, the student construction officer carefully measured the paint, mixing the colors evenly, one cup at a time. His formula, developed as a result of thoughtful problem solving, produced the necessary materials to finish the job. These kinds of on-site experiences proved to be not only common, but also essential in helping students develop skills in leadership, communication, group dynamics, and self-sufficiency.

Experiential Compassion

According to Madeline Kunin, former director secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, “Service learning resurrects idealism, compassion and altruism . . . we cannot survive as a nation unless we hold onto these qualities and teach them to our children” (National Commission on Service Learning, 2002). The teaching of compassion and empathy is frequently an objective of service learning courses; it was clearly a goal of the 1999 WTIS project in Anapra. On-site activities and experiences were selected in efforts to encourage students to follow their ideals; to urge them to lead an ethical, examined, and compassionate life; and to instill the qualities of a caring society in individuals who may one day become leaders in their communities.

While it is possible to foster feelings of altruism through thoughtful reading and engaged discussion, our effort was to encourage values development in an experiential learning environment. While in Anapra, for example, we met a young man from Guatemala, whose leg was amputated at the hip, the result of a tragic accident occurring when he tried to cross the

border illegally by “hopping a freight” just beyond the fence near Anapra. As the youngest of twelve, his opportunities in working the small family farm were slight (so many siblings ahead of him!). He had come to the border seeking new beginnings and a chance to build a life. Another tragic story emerged from our conversations with the pastor of Los Lomas Church. He explained that the small corner shrine near the front of the church had been built in memory of one of their own, a young woman raped and murdered, her body discarded on the mesa east of Juarez. Through these accounts and other stories of similar hardship, students were able to make sense of the scholarly and popular literatures they had read about social conditions on the border, including immigration issues and the ongoing, and yet unsolved, murders of hundreds of Juarez women. Importantly, students were also drawn into the worlds of the people they met and with whom they talked, experiencing the pain, joy, and struggle of their everyday lives. The cognitive and affective growth that team members experienced through these often intense encounters cultivated their capacity for compassion, empathy, and the natural and spontaneous attention to the welfare of others.

Engaged Reflection

The ethic of care, as feminist theorists have articulated it, provides opportunities for people to analyze critically their own activities of care, as well as to understand the broader place of caring in human life. Clearly, this attention to active reflection—achieved through student writing, thinking, and discussion—is central to the international service learning environment. Designed to aid students in drawing meaning from their individual and shared activities, our reflection sessions in Anapra proved to be lively, self-disclosive, and often emotionally-laden dialogues that helped students and faculty articulate and synthesize their experiences. Living in the *colonia*, within eyeshot of the affluence and physical beauty of the University of Texas-El Paso campus, we were constantly reminded of our own advantage and economic interest in a global society that privileges a first-world perspective. These student-led reflection sessions actively addressed issues of global citizenship, social and economic parity, and one’s human responsibility to address inequity at the individual and structural level.

If reflection allowed our team to discuss issues of social justice and global change, these sessions also functioned as “workshops” in interpersonal communication. In this small group setting, we were able to deal effectively with many of the small slights and overt acts of unkindness that erupt among students living and working in such small quarters. When possible, feelings of anger and hurt were acknowledged and diffused, with the reflection session acting not only as a spontaneous intervention, but also as an event of forgiveness and apology. Working together and in process, students on the Anapra trip gained important interpersonal skills in effective talking, empathetic listening, conflict resolution, and anger management. Much of this growth was facilitated and instantiated in the reflection context. As one student later wrote in her reflection journal,

Our evening reflection meetings were not always easy. People were quite open about their feelings, and it was sometimes painful to witness the apologies that happened in that space. Through it all, however, we worked to understand and respect one another, and I learned that I have skills as a mediator. I didn’t know this about myself before the trip. (Anonymous, 1999)

Reciprocity of Service

All too often, international service is seen as a one-way street, with students of privilege “bringing gifts,” “providing help,” even “ministering” to people of lesser financial means. Concerted efforts were made to avoid this mindset with the program in Anapra. Clearly

positioned as a collaborative effort, the Anapra project took its direction from local residents who were actively involved in community development throughout the westside *colonias* in the Juarez area. Students were encouraged to work side by side with these community leaders, taking an active role in planning and executing projects. This professionally-oriented experience produced shifts in self-perception for a number of students, allowing them to see themselves as their Anapra cohorts did—as competent, conscientious, thoughtful, problem-solving young adults who were courageous enough to live out their ideals. The value of this altered self-perception cannot be measured, but it surfaced repeatedly as an issue of salience in both in-country reflection sessions and post-trip conversations and correspondence.

Just as students received new insights about their professional capabilities from Anaprans, we all were recipients of emotional and psychological care. As individuals who traveled from a small Midwestern school to participate in service learning, we left Anapra as beneficiaries of increased feelings of dignity, self-respect, courage, and accountability; of broader knowledge and global understanding; and of genuine friendship and personal relationships. The day that we packed our vans and drove away from Anapra was overcast and windy. The children we'd grown to love stood with their dogs and toys on the doorstep and waved until we couldn't see them any more. Our trip to the border crossing was a silent one, as students dealt independently with feelings of loss and sadness. Clearly, we were all overcome with the grief of the moment, as we left behind people and a place we'd grown to regard as our own. These feelings of personal and collective connectedness stand as tangible evidence of the reciprocity of our experience in Anapra. Through this international service learning project, we served and were served; we both provided and received care.

Course Assessment

Admittedly a complex topic, assessment becomes even more complicated in the service learning context due to the process-oriented character of the service learning course. Much of the strength of the service learning class lies in the ways in which students (and faculty) rise to address unexpected challenges. Some of the most gratifying moments in service learning occur when students exceed the expectations of the course or the situation produces a unique learning opportunity. The holistic nature of service learning—which depends upon a multi-faceted knowledge base—also makes assessment more complex, as we seek to evaluate growth on a range of cognitive, affective, expressive, and behavioral planes.

The assessment tool shown below (Figure 2) was generated as a means of facilitating this evaluation through reflection and self-writing by the course instructor and feedback from students. Although open-ended and designed to initiate creative discussion, this guide also addresses key components of student learning in the service learning context. Framed within the five points of the international service learning model discussed previously, this assessment tool allows the instructor to ask specific questions about the service learning experience and to relate these queries to the organizing principles of the course. Importantly, this guide aids in providing structure and organization in the course evaluation phase.

Figure 2

REFLECTION GUIDE FOR COURSE ASSESSMENT						
	Did this course increase knowledge of service community & social challenges facing its residents?	Did this course develop increased feelings of self-worth, self-efficacy, & self-awareness among student participants	Did this course improve the communication skills of participating students?	Did this course encourage students to view the world through the perspectives of others?	Did this course aid students in understanding the impacts of their everyday practices on the global community?	Did this course help students develop habits of kindness, empathy, & respect in interactions with others?
Global Inclusion						
Experiential Compassion						
Engaged Reflection						
Reciprocity of Service						
Multi-disciplinary Preparation						

Conclusion

The 1999 Winter Term in Service trip to Anapra was the first of three international service projects I designed while a member of the DePauw University Department of Communication Arts and Sciences. I also accompanied 17 students to the Texas-Mexico border in 2000 to work with 80 children at the Hands of Luke Medical Clinic and Orphanage; and I was the faculty sponsor for a month-long construction and medical service project in Thika, Kenya, in 2001.

In each case, we lived in the heart of the communities we served; we worked closely with local partners, advancing the projects they identified as important; and we slept elbow-to-elbow in sleeping bags on concrete floors. We learned important character lessons of leadership, self-reliance, problem solving, personal courage, kindness, and interpersonal communication. Importantly, these international service projects taught us much about the lived experiences and social conditions of the poor in Mexico and Africa and our own capacity for empathy and care. We gained insights about integrity, dignity, mutual respect, reciprocity, tolerance, inequity, and the importance of sacrifice for others. Clearly, these trips of three to four weeks each could not replicate the experiences of long-term in-country stays. Even so, the projects' focus on cross-cultural communication, social justice, and engaged reflection produced an intense and life-changing experience for students and faculty alike. Not only were we the beneficiaries of moral and ethical lessons, we also developed a broader sense of what it means to live responsibly as a citizen of the world.

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