Engaging people, not projects:
Re-defining the standards of service-learning through a community led project in Tshapasha, South Africa

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In the summer of 2009, a group of American and South African university students travelled to Tshapasha, a rural community in northeastern South Africa, to improve the community’s water filtration system. Sitting in the shade of a tree outside the chief’s home, we laid out our plans to the village’s governing board. These plans included conducting a survey on water health awareness, taking water samples, and investigating the condition of the filtration system. One woman rose, and, speaking through a translator, told us that if we wished to work with the community, we must change our plans. Other outside groups had already come into the village to ask questions, but they rarely provided any tangible benefits. “We are tired of questions,” the woman told us. “We are ready for results.”

The comments from this Tshapasha community member exemplify how the concerns of service recipients are often unaccounted for in the creation of student service-learning projects. This problem is not caused by negligent student behavior. Rather, it is built into the very structure of these projects. Because academic institutions design service-learning as a tool for student development, the approach unintentionally marginalizes the interests of the community students wish to serve.

During our service-learning project in South Africa, we found ways of overcoming this flaw. Knowing that we didn’t have with all the answers, we came to Tshapasha with questions rather than a concrete plan.

The experiences that followed illustrate the potential benefits that can be attained by both students and their community partners when students drop their thoughtfully-organized plans and come with an open mind and open ears instead.

Designing in the dark
Access to potable water is not a reality for many South African communities, including the village of Tshapasha in the Limpopo province. People living in this community are driven to utilize unclean and contaminated supplies, which frequently contain pathogens and other harmful substances that can cause illnesses like malaria, cholera, and diarrhea.¹

Since 2004, the students from both the University of Virginia (UVa) and the South African University of Venda (Univen) have developed relationships with Tshapasha residents through the educational and infrastructural support of the Southern African Virginia Networks and Associations (SAVANA) consortium. The consortium aims to “facilitate research, education, and outreach activities related to the environment” through a partnership between South African institutions and the University of Virginia. This long-term relationship has contributed to a lasting legacy of mutual intellectual empowerment, allowing the students to understand the community’s perspective.²,³

Through SAVANA, students from both universities have been introduced to each other’s cultures via several classes taught each year by UVa Professors Robert Swap and Carol Ann Spreen. One such class, taught during the January term, is entitled Ethics and Protocols of International Research. Another course, taught over the summer in South Africa and Mozambique, is People, Culture, and Environment of South Africa. By taking these classes together, we were able to
develop personal contacts that proved integral to the implementation of our project.

During the 2009 January term class, U.Va and Univen students met face-to-face to discuss the problematic filtration system. In hopes of improving this system, we worked with these students from Univen to draft proposals for funding. Like many proposals for service-learning projects, we were required to have a solid plan of action, a detailed timeline, and a list of expected outcomes. Though this is standard for service-learning projects, we had a difficult time “filling in the blanks.” The little information we had been able to gather shed light on only a few aspects of the village and the problem we wanted to solve. We felt that we could only make an educated guess about the impact our project would have on the community. In order to address this concern, we developed a community survey, which we would conduct before carrying out the bulk of the project. We wanted to ask community members the very questions we felt we weren’t qualified to answer - what did they know and how did they feel about the water issues in their community?

Checking our expectations at the door
With from the Jefferson Public Citizens (JPC) program and the Community Based Undergraduate Research Grant, we travelled to South Africa. Through our relationships with Univen students, we met with community leaders and the water committee of Tshapasha to learn about the status of the slow-sand filtration system. We asked them what they thought the problems with the filters were and elicited their suggestions for improvements. They actively voiced their opinions about water issues in the community, identifying specific problems such as the inundation of the filter tanks in the wet season and the limited porosity of the sand particles in the filter system. Several water committee members offered suggestions for improvements, encouraging us to clean out the pipes and fill the filters with a different kind of sand. In addition, they already displayed a deep investment in their community’s water issues by detailing their plan to expand the village’s water delivery system. We had not anticipated that the community leaders would be so knowledgeable about and so invested in the current filtration system.
When we first fleshed out the details of our plans, the water committee exercised greater agency by encouraging us to change the direction of our project. They were not keen on our desire to conduct a community-wide survey because data collection was of secondary importance to the village. The community had experienced similar surveys in the past, and they were ready to begin working on a project that would generate direct benefits.

We were both surprised and honored that these community leaders were comfortable sharing so much information about their community with us. We believe that the long-term collaboration between the community and the SAVANA consortium facilitated this openness. By bringing questions to the committee rather than presenting them with our own interpretation of their problems, we attained a clearer assessment of the issues in the village and formed a better basis on which we could collectively devise a remedy.

**Locals take the lead**

With the community leading the way, we began generating ideas to improve the tanks. We conducted a physical examination and water quality test for both of the tanks. Several members of the community suggested that there was not enough water pressure to push the water from the bottom of the filter tanks to the top of the storage tanks and believed that raising the filters would be the best way to solve this problem. Drawing on our own knowledge of fluid mechanics, we tested this hypothesis by creating a variety of filter-to-storage prototypes. By raising the filter models in these prototypes, we found that it did in fact solve the issue of insufficient water pressure. We adopted the community’s suggestions and began to think of ways to elevate the filter tanks. After weighing several options, we decided that building a brick platform would be an effective solution. This structure could be constructed from locally obtained materials, and since a number of volunteers had the skills and the experience to build it, community participation and ownership would be optimized.

Over the next few weeks, we worked in tandem with community volunteers to build the brick platform. We emptied the slow-sand filters, placing the sand and gravel on a tarp near the construction site. We then moved the filter tanks off the site and the volunteer bricklayers went to work on the platform. After the foundation and outer walls had been completed, we all worked to fill it in with rocks and soil collected in the area, and the bricklayers finished by putting down a top layer of cement. The project required many hours of collective physical labor, which eroded the cultural barriers between the students and the community.

Though we participated in the construction of the brick platform, the expertise for the project was drawn from within the community. Four volunteers had extensive masonry experience, and a knowledgeable water committee member contributed his insight as well. He oversaw the connection of the pipe and valve system and created a wire basket to protect the pipes.

The knowledge and expertise of the community guided us throughout the project. The citizens of Tshapasha were fully vested in working collaboratively toward a solution. The water committee and community leaders already had clear understanding about the water issues in their village. The volunteers always came to meetings and the project worksite eager to participate. There was no lack of interest or motivation; all that was needed was clear direction and planning. The students provided the spark to get the project off the ground by offering our time and effort.

“It is vital to ‘make a place at the table’ for community members.”
Redefining service-learning success through reciprocal empowerment

After assessing our outcomes, we realized that we did not achieve a majority of our original service-learning project objectives. However, we achieved a different measure of success - we learned how to let those affected by the project take the lead. As an end result, we were able to participate in the process of reciprocal empowerment.

Reciprocal empowerment entails that both parties, the students and the community, recognize that they have something unique to offer. They both contribute to and gain from the service-learning process. This pattern is exemplified in our service-learning experience. Each party had something different to bring the project. The community willingly and openly shared their thoughts and opinions with us during the planning stages. They offered their expertise, time, and labor during the execution stages, and they even reflected on the project with us before our departure.

In a group discussion setting, community members noted that they wanted to be engaged right from the start in future service-learning endeavors. This is an important point, because traditional service-learning practices encourage students to have a solution worked out before coming into the community. Another important insight that arose from the discussion was that the community wished to pursue endeavors other than water purification. They wanted help in constructing a local hardware store, building a library and empowering more community members, specifically women. This mismatch between community needs and project goals has been observed by other students in the past. We realized that needs addressed by service learning projects may not be the most pressing need for the community. It is difficult to determine their needs without their input, thus it is vital to “make a place at the table” for community members.

As students, we acted as a catalyst to “get the ball rolling” by providing transportation, planning and financial resources. We gained valuable insights through cross-cultural collaboration, and we gained the ability to adapt to community feedback and unexpected limitations. We learned the importance of listening to the community’s voice whenever you have the desire to serve. Ultimately, we discovered that we can never assume anything about a community we want to work with, a humbling revelation that has driven each team member to expect the unexpected and to be open to the ideas of others.

It is important for every student to have an eye-opening experience like ours when completing service-learning projects. Unfortunately, traditional service-learning practices do not foster such revelations. We challenge academic institutions, students, and communities alike to redefine the current format of service learning projects. These projects should cultivate stronger student-community collaborations by encouraging open communication and involvement of community members throughout the entire process.

Endnotes


Rachel Brown-Glazner is a fourth year mechanical engineering student who is interested in working internationally.
Veronica Gutierrez is a fourth year student majoring in both environmental policy and media studies who plans on integrating lessons learned from this service-learning project in a future civic engagement career.

Ethan Heil is a third year civil engineering student who plans to travel back to South Africa to continue building on this project and others.