



LEARNING SERVICE

DRAGONS PHILOSOPHY ON SERVICE WORK ABROAD

HOW DOES DRAGONS ENCOURAGE A STUDENT'S DESIRE TO DO GOOD IN THE WORLD, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME ENSURING THAT THESE EXPERIENCES ACTUALLY BENEFIT LOCAL COMMUNITIES ABROAD?

Dragons believes that we need to shift the way we think of volunteer travel. Instead of focusing on “service work”—on the idea that short-term volunteers can contribute to communities abroad—we advocate a paradigm shift: we choose, instead, to focus on “learning service.”

LEARNING SERVICE IS A HOLISTIC EXPERIENCE that combines an intimate and authentic engagement with the local community, the study of effective development, and the contribution to an established community-driven project. It is the process of living, working alongside, and humbly absorbing the culture of those being served while coordinating closely with project managers to understand the trajectory of the project, from inception to completion and beyond. It is an acknowledgment that often it is the volunteer who stands to gain as much or more from the work. And it is a commitment to making contributions that create positive impacts in the communities coupled with the humility to always listen and learn first.

WE BELIEVE THAT EFFECTIVE, COLLABORATIVE SERVICE WORK BEGINS WHEN STUDENTS ARE GUIDED TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS:

- Was the project initiated by the local community, and is there community ownership?
- Does the project value sustainable community empowerment over infrastructure development?
- Was the project initiated due to actual needs in the community, or because of the ease of integrating unskilled workers (us) into the tasks?
- What is the lifespan of the project, and how will it evolve once outsiders leave?

A GROWING BODY OF EVIDENCE WARNS THAT TRAVELERS SEEKING TO DO GOOD CAN END UP INADVERTENTLY HARMING THE COMMUNITIES THEY HOPE TO SUPPORT.

In Cambodia, for instance, the growth of well-intentioned visits to orphanages may be perversely encouraging people to buy, rent, or kidnap children in order to maintain appearances for foreign travelers. According to a recent UNICEF report, 75% of children in Cambodian orphanages have at least one living parent. In Thailand, nearly 90% of foreign volunteers seeking to teach English are sent—week after week—to the same schools. As a result, the same Thai students end up subjected to the same introductory English lesson taught by well-intentioned but inexperienced Westerners. These schools end up becoming tourist destinations rather than places of learning. Effective community engagement often means investing in teacher training rather than feel good fixes. After all, how many children in Thailand really need one more Westerner to teach them “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes”?

Dragons students gain a sense of what real service and giving back abroad should look like. *Learning Service* demands that we say “no” to an opportunity that may adversely impact the people and places we visit. It also requires that we sustain long-term relationships with communities abroad; while it is easier on schedules and budgets to plan short trips, we must not create a revolving door of unskilled helpers that locals accommodate.

Community empowerment is also paramount to the process of effective service and development work. At Dragons, we work closely with organizations and individuals that represent and work to support the collective voice of the communities within which the project is being undertaken. Students are then brought into ongoing relationships as honored guests and humble servants, adhering to the needs and goals expressed by those already in action, and adding their own contribution to a pre-established process. Projects that assume the needs of local people and operate with cultural chauvinism to implement a prepackaged service project often lead to inefficiency, miscommunication, and an overall disempowerment amongst individuals. Accordingly, Dragons often works with grass-roots organizations that were started within the community and are supported, run, and often funded from within the community.

As a cornerstone to Global Citizenship Education, *Learning Service* becomes a process of developing empathy for those whose resource-base and opportunity-levels may be less, but whose life-histories and cultures provide often profound lessons that aren't available to those living in more developed countries. By emphasizing the "learning" in *Learning Service*, students are encouraged to critically engage with their values while they develop a knowledge-base that extends beyond their short-lived engagement. In *Learning Service*, students achieve a larger understanding of development issues and the efforts to address systemic problems in health care, education, access to clean food and water, etc. More significantly, students develop a moral compass in which they see how their actions and decisions impact the people and environment outside of their immediate communities.

INTRIGUED AND WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Learning Service is a book written by Dragons instructors, Daniela Papi-Thorton and Claire Bennett. It helps inform our service philosophy and answers questions such as: What does it mean to serve? Who benefits? How do you do more good than harm?

We highly recommend it as a resource. You can learn more or find the book at: www.learningservice.info

NO ONE EXPLAINS OUR APPROACH TO *LEARNING SERVICE* BETTER THAN OUR ALUMNI. HERE'S A QUOTE FROM A PAST DRAGONS STUDENT ON THEIR *LEARNING SERVICE* EXPERIENCE:

"After discussing with my supervisor and observing the organization, I realized that their needs did not align with my initial expectations of what I would be doing and I needed to drop my expectations altogether. At first, I thought I would be spending some of my time working at GLC's store, but it turned out that my skills in English and computers matched best with their needs for an after-school English class and an additional teacher for the preschoolers. Every day is challenging, rewarding, exhausting, and exciting. The students are so bright and energetic, and I continuously feel grateful for the opportunity to teach them. Although I am their teacher, I truly think that they are teaching me even more, and maybe that's what service is really about. As an instructor told our group in the first month of our trip, service is not a one-way road; it should be filled with exchanges between for lack of better words, the "server" and "the served." I didn't fully comprehend what that meant one month ago, but I think I have a much better understanding of that notion now."

-CHRISTINE CHO, PRINCETON BRIDGE YEAR INDIA STUDENT

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