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Closing the Loop: Debriefing and the Short-Term College Missions Team

DAVID M. JOHNSTONE

Colleges routinely send teams across cultural and economic lines to serve other communities. The returning from any cross-cultural experience is laced with dissonance. This article hopes to provide paradigms to assist making these trips a more significant educational experience. Using Mannoia's description of how learning takes place, we perceive that all aspects of the educational experience can become tools for creating learning. Short-term cross-cultural trips have the potential for being one of the most formative pedagogical experiences of a student's college career. The tools presented here should assist them to transform the event into a significant life experience.

Introduction

Since the late seventies, students from Westmont College have been spending their Spring Break in Ensenada, Mexico. With numbers varying from year to year, about a third of the student population can be involved in partnering with the Ensenada churches. They spend their week providing medical and dental aid, building homes and churches, leading vacation Bible schools and in a varied number of other ministries. Potter's Clay, as it is called at Westmont, is similar to outreaches sponsored by countless universities across America and Canada. George Fox University sends out teams every Christmas, spring break, and summer. Harvard College has teams of students who regularly cross cultural and economic lines to serve other communities. Colleges and universities have created unique alternatives to the "fun, sun, and beer" extolled by travel companies to attract North American college students on vacation. While the party ethos of academic breaks is still very real in the undergraduate culture, the current generation, known as the *Millennials*, seem to be deeply committed to integrating volunteerism and service into their lives.

The challenge for Christian educational institutes has been to encourage these student-led initiatives, while providing support, perspective, and preparation for the students. In the past decade, there has been the desire to maximize these experiences

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and assist students in translating their new understanding into their daily lives. Particularly in colleges that affirm the role of Christ in their educational mission, there has been a desire to bring together the students' experiences with the stated goals of the college. While good preparation is essential, for a trip of this nature to have lasting impact, there must be an opportunity for the student to reflect and internalize the situations they have encountered. This reflection must be intentional and facilitated for it to have any enduring significance.

If these conversations are not deliberate, the returning student will often slide into the following type of thought process:

"Oh, I can't believe I am finally home... What a great time..."

"You wouldn't believe what I saw... heard... smelled... did... It was amazing..."

"Look at my pictures... Listen to my stories..."

"Ooh...?"

"They don't seem very interested... Don't they care...?"

"I feel like I am casting pearls before...!"

The return from any cross-cultural experience is laced with emotions. Whether it is a study abroad, mission, or service trip, the personal investment is greater than any exotic tourist adventure. There is an investment of emotions, thought, and relationships. There can be profound changes and challenges to the traveler. Relational, political, economic, cultural, theological, and emotional identities can all come under scrutiny. These experiences can be some of the most significant ways in which the worldview of a student is shaped. Many homecomings to North America end up in frustration because the traveler has changed, but little seems to have changed at home (Storti 1997:13–48). There is even the sense that some at home refuse to recognize the change in the traveler. From the traveler's perspective, it seems that even those dear to her don't seem interested in how she has grown (Espineli Chinn 1987:33–36). The goal of this paper is to provide some tools to minimize that frustration and assist in processing the cross-cultural experience.

My intent is to address the experiences of students who are based in Christian colleges and universities. They tend to be groups committed to extending assistance and kindness across cultural, economic, and social boundaries. They desire to incorporate a strong faith-based element to the trip: there is a sense that they are "called" to participate and extend God's grace. These groups may journey within their state or travel internationally. They usually have designated leaders and these leaders are vital to the success of each group.

Over the last 40 years, with the rise of student volunteerism in North America, short-term mission and service projects have come under significant scrutiny and criticism. The criticism tends to revolve around issues of financial stewardship and relational depth. This line of reasoning suggests that finances used on short-term projects could be better utilized for longer-term projects. As well, the argument continues, when students travel to a location for a short duration they fail to establish deep enough relationships with the nationals to make any significant impact. Therefore, it is only those committed to the "long haul" that are able to have any real impact for the kingdom of God.

I will not wade into this conflict. However, I will suggest that, while the impact may be varied for those at the receiving end of a short-term mission/service [or even study] trip, the impact is potentially enormous for the student who is traveling and volunteering (Murdoch 1993:86–94). This fact alone is worth the journey. The educational significance of these experiences is vast. The challenges to their worldview, their heightened cultural sensitivity, and increased self-awareness brought about by these trips cannot be easily replicated by other experiences. As colleges and universities endorse and promote these programs, the schools can naturally maximize the pedagogical component of these trips.

In the following pages, I wish to provide a couple of paradigms to assist the team leader in encouraging their team members to use their trip as a major growth and educational experience. This encouragement must be intentional and guided, or many students will not know how to “*close the loop*” in their learning.

An Educational Paradigm

Jim Mannoia in his examination of a liberal arts education from a Christian reference point observes that the critical elements necessary for deep and committed growth are what he calls: *dissonance*, *habituation*, *modeling* and *community* (2000:77–90). Mannoia’s reflections resonate with the aims of many Christian colleges in North America. However, they also have validity when examining cross-cultural experiences. In the context of short-term missions as part of a student’s education, all of his suggested elements are fundamental for significant growth.

These four variables are necessary to promote [what Mannoia calls] *critical commitment* in a student. These are described as: provoking (1) *dissonance* and encouraging (2) *habituation* while providing for both (3) *modeling* and (4) *community*. These four factors often function parallel to one another, but at times they also function sequentially. Each factor is necessary for deep growth. Ideally, all aspects of the campus and educational experience become tools for creating *dissonance* in a student’s life. Examples of these range from the material taught in the classroom, the relationships the student observes between faculty and staff, and the worship that happens in chapel, to the conversations with peers over a meal. All of these interactions are means by which tensions, questions and “*angst*” are identified, discussed, and explored. These “tools” challenge the way students experience their lives. They encourage students to examine the lens by which they view the world. Dissonance by itself does not bring the student to a level of understanding or wisdom. The purpose of dissonance is to encourage the student to identify and integrate the implications of their reflections into a way of life that exhibits more integrity. These implications are translated into *habits*, patterns, and “ways of living” which reflect a thoughtful and critical response to these situations which provoke questions. However, living examples that demonstrate and provide options for responding to these issues must also be present. These *models* are individuals that provide students with multiple responses or paradigms for responding to situations or living their life. Besides *modeling*, a student also needs an environment that provides security and safety. A *community* provides the context that gives the student this sense of security in the exploration of their own identity and learning.

Dissonance & Habituation

Transposing this paradigm onto cross-cultural experiences is not difficult. All trips have an element of surprise and departure from the familiar. These things can be as basic as encountering unclear road signs to the perplexing way a culture communicates non-verbally. While most surprises are easily dealt with, others can frequently bring up questions that challenge the individual's worldview, ethics, faith, and values. These types of questions can include such contextual questions as:

1. How can I help so many poor?
2. Why do I get to eat so much food when so many are hungry?
3. Do I have some responsibility for what I see?
4. Is it true that if someone just works hard they will succeed?
5. Why doesn't the government take care of these people?
6. Are bribes acceptable in order to accomplish good?
7. These churches worship in weird ways, is that o.k.?
8. What can I do with the injustice I hear about?
9. This work creates such environmental damage, but it employs and feeds so many people. . . .

These types of questions cause us to wrestle with our identities. They challenge us to reflect on what is valuable to ourselves. Issues that we have always thought important suddenly are brought into question because of things we have seen and experienced. Often easy or clear answers are not provided and, if they are, seldom are they satisfying. Upon return [reentry], the differences between our experiences away and at home are frequently magnified. To some the differences are overwhelming. Many find that "... the pain of reentry is often much greater than the initial culture shock" of going away (Austin 1986: xxiii).

In order for the dissonance or angst of the experiences to move towards what Mannoia calls *habituation* a person must be purposeful. Habituation is the integration of the lessons a student has learned into their thinking and actions. One helpful tool for assisting a student in this direction is found in the biblical book of Proverbs. Throughout the book there is the recurring theme of gaining "knowledge, understanding and wisdom" [Proverbs 2:6; 2:19–20; 17:27; etc.]. This is a progressive approach which begins with observing what is happening [*knowledge*], grasping the context [*understanding*] and applying the implications [*wisdom*]. It is a simple biblical paradigm which enables the student, team leader, and others to assist someone in processing an experience.

The paradigm of knowledge, understanding and wisdom becomes particularly significant in understanding the information a student receives through their eyes, ears, touch, and taste. These are sensory perceptions that the team leader can help them identify and to discern as *knowledge* in their experience. Questions such as: What do they hear? What have they seen? What did they have for dinner? What do they feel? These are sensory questions and are an important starting place for any debriefing. They may have observed and experienced hosts being hospitable and generous, often beyond their means. The team member identifies that they have experienced tremendous generosity and kindness. The team leader can then push the reflection further: Why were your hosts kind and hospitable? Was it cultural? Did they feel honored by

your presence? Did they wish to honor their guests? Are their relationships with their guests more important than food for their family? Was it a pride issue? Would they feel embarrassed or shamed if they could not properly extend kindness to their guests? These types of questions help a team member *understand* what occurred to them.

Many reflections stop at the point of understanding. Few explore the potential impact of this type of experience. However, in order for there to be growth and learning, the implications of an experience needs to be clarified. Returning to the hospitality illustration the student may ask: Am I as generous as my hosts? Why or why not? Do I extend kindness to others regardless of how it might hurt me? Do I extend kindness so that it might benefit me? Pursuing the implications of what a student knows and understands is to begin transforming it into *wisdom*.

Wrestling with the implications is what we have referred to as *dissonance*. The struggle may take a long time, but when it is integrated into their life it becomes what Mannoia describes as *habituation*. This is the absorption of what they have learned into the fabric of their life developing responses and habits that have been enlightened by their cross-cultural experience.

Modeling & Community

In order for the challenges, discomfort of cross-cultural experiences [*dissonance*] to be transformed into new ways of acting and thinking [*habituation*] the individual needs to be in contact with those who are able to demonstrate alternative ways of response [modeling]. As well, they need a larger community that provides them with a sense of security and identity in the midst of this *angst*. At a certain level these models can be historical or even allegorical; however a living and present individual is tremendously important; often this is provided by the leader of the team. The team leader has a significant role; they assist in the creation of these models and by facilitating team unity. More importantly they shape and mold the environment in which the students are able to grow. The leader determines whether a team has the liberty to ask hard questions, face moments of confrontation, explore meanings of identity. They are the ones who have a massive share in determining whether the group is a place of intimacy and security.

Within that environment of intimacy, she also models for the whole team how to pose, frame, provoke, and wrestle with the questions upon which a team and its members reflect. She also helps determine the freedom felt by the group to explore answers to these questions. Beyond conversations, they have an equally important role in providing the team with an object lesson on how to respond to the dissonance around them. The team leader is naturally under constant observation. They are required by the nature of their position to live a life of transparency. The way she lives her life while encountering the unfamiliar becomes a model for how the team responds. The leader demonstrates through her actions, questions, and commitments the “appropriate” and “inappropriate” ways to respond to the sensory overload experienced by the team. If the leader displays tremendous anxiety in the face of surprises, they will likewise produce great anxiety among the team of students. How the leader works through the concern will be observed and used as a possible way of processing future worries.

Beyond being a model, the team leader establishes the genetic code by which a community is developed. The task of building a community is a solemn mandate. As

O'Connor observes, "This is the most creative and difficult work to which any of us will ever be called. There is no higher achievement in all the world than to be a person in community, and this is the call of every Christian" (2001:32). They help create a place of refuge and safety for the entire team. It becomes a place whereby mistakes, questions and confusion can be articulated and explored. Such a setting is integral for the learning that is experienced by the student traveler. A strong community is crucial for a student to be able to integrate the lessons of their journey.

In Conclusion

Short-term cross-cultural service and mission trips have any number of goals. These aims may be material, physical, relational, or spiritual. They may range from housing the homeless, feeding the hungry, extending kindness to strangers, to providing hope for the despairing. Each trip varies in its accomplishment of these goals; and in its success and impact on the host community. In spite of these differences, the most significant and enduring impact of each trip is upon the individual team members. Particularly for college students, short-term cross-cultural experiences have the potential for being one of the most formative and "worldview shaping" pedagogical experiences of their college career.

My purpose in producing this paper is to outline and provide a paradigm and strategy in which a team leader can lay the foundation for how a team member internalizes their cross cultural experience. The paradigm suggests that a cross-cultural journey is a tremendous learning and educational experience. The components of dissonance, community, modeling, and habituation as outlined in Mannoia's model provide a simple but highly functional means of looking at the experience. The strategy which assists the student to walk away from their trip with a wealth of insight and value is tied to helping them go through the transition of identifying the knowledge they have gathered, grasping and understanding the context and translating the implications into wisdom. This foundation enables the team member to process their experience before, during, and after the trip. These skills provide the team member with tools and proficiencies which allow them to consolidate what their senses have grasped. This consolidation of sensory information will allow them to place their reflections in a framework that will help clarify the implications of their experience for how they live their lives. In short, these tools should enable them to transform the event into a significant life experience. Essentially, they will determine the implications of their experience and "close the loop" by clarifying and incorporating the things they have learned.

My purpose is not to eliminate what is commonly called *reentry shock*; many good things happen in this uncomfortable transition. The more deeply an individual identifies, immerses, and invest themselves into the host culture, the more challenging a transition they encounter when they return home. However, because of that investment they can also encounter great changes and deeper personal growth. The personal benefits and rewards are more extensive if a student seizes the whole experience. The goal of debriefing is to help the student process their journey so that they are better able to incorporate their lessons into their lives for the benefit of the Kingdom of God. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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