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# Lest Best Intentions become the Enemy of the Good

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By Gerald W. Schlabach, University of St. Thomas

No student should do “service learning” in another cultural setting without having to stop in his or her tracks at some point by reading Ivan Illich’s famous 1968 speech, “**To Hell with Good Intentions.**” But neither should faculty members hesitate to lead classes with a service-learning or community-engagement

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component because Illich has left them paralyzed.

“To Hell with Good Intentions” is certainly a devastating read. Illich was a radical Austrian priest and philosopher who spent much of his career in Latin America. That career spanned the eras of decolonization, the United Nations decades of “development,” and the rise of liberation theology as a critique of what were optimistic and paternalistic development schemes at best, exploitive ones at worst. Illich’s 1968 speech was to a group of volunteers in Mexico who impressed him, he said, both with their authentic motivations and their hypocrisy.

The volunteers were willing enough to subject their programs to critique that they had invited him to speak at their retreat, even though they knew that he had been campaigning internationally for “the voluntary withdrawal of all North American volunteer armies from Latin America – missionaries, Peace Corps members and groups like [theirs],” who constituted a “‘division’ organized for the benevolent invasion of Mexico.” They were enlightened enough that they recognized that they had more to learn from their hosts than they had to give. But to Illich they were all the more hypocritical because they had no intention of following through on what they were learning with such a thorough and critical reappraisal of their programs that it might actually require them to go home.

Illich baited his listeners by assuring them that “I do have deep faith in the enormous good will of the U.S. volunteer.” But even the best of them “cannot help being ultimately vacationing salesmen for the middle-class ‘American Way of Life,’ since that is really the only life you know.” If anything, their good will and their good intentions, were the very source of that



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hypocrisy which made them dangerous. “The idea that every American has something to give, and at all times may, can and should give it, explains why it occurred to students that they could help Mexican peasants ‘develop’ by spending a few months in their villages.”

Here then is the profound dilemma that conscientious professors will face if they even begin to consider designing an international course that will take students not to historic cultural centers, say, in Europe, but across the deeper cross-cultural divides that come through personal engagement with the poor in the so-called Third World or global South. Such a class can be one of the most profound and needful educational experiences that privileged American students may ever have. But at what cost to our hosts?

To guide students through the dislocation by which they come to see themselves, their nation, their culture and their privilege through the eyes of the poor – and to grapple with arguments that U.S. military and economic domination has kept others poor while making that very privilege possible – is liberal-arts education at its best. What’s more, everything we have learned about experiential learning confirms that not even the most masterful teacher can replicate in the classroom what students will learn through immersion experiences that engage them directly with the poor. So to learn Illich’s very lessons, nothing quite takes the place of going and being there.

But if Illich is right – always right – and such encounters inevitably hurt the poor themselves, then what we will be inviting is simply a more sophisticated form of exploitation, made possible through yet another layer of privilege. Since 1968, short-term “mission trips” have if anything

become more popular with students, making it easier to recruit them than ever. Yet those same trips often reinforce very paternalism of which Illich warned. What then to do?

I suppose I could be among the hypocrites to whom Illich addressed his acerbic critique. For I always assign Illich to the same students that yes, I continue taking to Guatemala for a course



on The Church in Latin America. Having taught six courses there in the last 12 years, I obviously have not desisted. To be sure, I can draw on somewhat particular resources to mitigate the dangers Illich identified (though other professors will enjoy other ones, particular to their own experiences and locales). Seven years of previous work in Central America, local connections and Spanish fluency have helped me maintain authentic partnerships with Latin American hosts. Such partnership is all the more possible because our most important host in Guatemala has been the parish of San Lucas Tolimán, which has been hosting volunteer groups such as the University of St. Thomas's **VISION** program for years on its own terms, in ways that have built up the self-confidence of the largely Mayan community in the region.

But at least two other reasons for doing international service-learning courses should also encourage professors, whatever mix of resources and prospective locale.

First, this is not 1968. I have seen pictures of

San Lucas Tolimán in the 1960s. One of the 12 towns around the shore of Lake Atitlán that date back to pre-Colombian times, it was still easier to reach by boat in 1968 than by road. Streets were alternately dusty and muddy. Few houses were stone and none of cement. Often one-roomed, the walls of better houses were sometimes made of wooden slabs and many were mere corn stalks. Illich did not want to condemn isolated Latin American towns like this to perpetual abject poverty, but he did want their “development” to be authentic – at their own pace in accord with their indigenous cultural strengths. So too the young Fr. Greg Shaffer of Minnesota who had begun working there only 5 years before. As an extension of their pastoral ministries, Shaffer and his colleagues sought to empower people to better their own lives according to their own priorities and Mayan communal values. But even the best development projects never happen in isolation.

For better and for worse, San Lucas now looks very different. For many though certainly not all, the housing stock is much improved. Paved roads now have San Lucas well-integrated into the national and global economy. Consumer goods abound. To the chagrin of professors who wish students could stay off Facebook for a few weeks in order to really be present in Guatemala, internet access has gotten much easier just in the last 5 years. Our class now spends a little less time discussing the role of the Church during Guatemala’s decades of brutal repression, and a lot more time discussing the challenges of maintaining both gospel values and Mayan identity amid the relentless pressures of globalization.

In other words, globalization has left fewer and fewer pristine cultures developing in their own authentic ways. We might wish otherwise. We might wish that more North Americans and

others had heeded Illich's warnings in 1968. But to do the very sort of critical analysis that Illich exemplified is to look unblinkingly at our own current challenges – in light of the historical forces that got us here, to be sure, but always with an eye toward present realities. The question that now presses upon those concerned for international social justice is whether and how the positive dimensions of globalization may yet mitigate the negative dimensions of globalization that threaten to homogenize and flatten out the richness of diverse human cultures.

Which brings me to my second reason for continuing to do international service-learning courses. As the old proverb goes, the best can easily become the enemy of the good. To consign “good intentions” to hell in hopes of clearing the stage for only the best intentions, on behalf of the best development efforts alone, may have its own unintended side effects. It may leave vulnerable peoples in the global South without any partnerships of solidarity to counter those who would exploit them with far worse intentions.

When I accepted last year's faculty award for service learning I shared the words of a Salvadoran woman in a refugee camp just inside the Honduran border in the mid-1980s. “Ustedes son participes en nuestra voz,” she told the small delegation of North American visitors I was part of. The literal translation: “You are participants in our voice.” The deeper translation: “We cannot leave this camp. We have no power but our words. We depend on you to convey our words in the North, where the powerful are making decisions that determine our futures.”

Fr. Greg Shaffer knew Ivan Illich personally and Illich's ideas helped shape his ministry among the Maya of Guatemala. But he made a

different decision about North American volunteers. He welcomed them. He knew quite well that many came with naïve illusions about the help they would offer in the few days of their “mission trips.” But he took their good intentions and engaged in a kind of reverse exploitation. He praised them profusely for mixing a little cement or tying a little rebar. And then he told them that what they were really offering was a message of dignity. Their willingness to work under the direction of the Maya had created a very different relationship than what the Maya had historically experienced from Guatemala’s ladinos of the dominant Spanish culture. And when volunteers returned to North America to tell their stories and convey the struggles of Latin America’s poor, their most important service of all would only be beginning. In either case their real service was solidarity.

The development strategy that the San Lucas Tolimán parish represents is not without flaws. I suspect that the influx of volunteers that Fr. Shaffer welcomed along with their skimpy tank tops, blue jeans, cameras and iPods has played some part in helping to “sell” the middle-class American culture that is a forceful driver of globalization. But I continue to take students to San Lucas in good conscience because I am equally certain that any negative impact from volunteers has long been a drop in the bucket of globalizing influences. The best is the enemy of the good. And if merely good intentions allow solidarity to take shape, that can be very good indeed – good for our students and their liberal-arts educations, but above all for Guatemalans.

Obviously other professors, designing international service-learning courses in other locales, have to draw on their own sets of resources and relationships in order to insure that their courses build authentic partnerships

of solidarity. But that is the transferable lesson: authentic partnerships are the key.

In a round-about way, that lesson is one that Ivan Illich in his characteristically acerbic discourse actually endorsed. “If you insist on working with the poor,” Illich told his audience in 1968, “if this is your vocation, then at least work among the poor who can tell you to go to hell.” With their deep ethics of hospitality, few cultures in the global South may literally do that. But stripped of Illich’s verve, his advice points to exactly what faculty most need in order to offer a course in the global South that is both pedagogically successful and morally responsible – good and self-confident hosts.

Look for them. Look for hosts who know their own dignity, who are deeply embedded in their own respectful partnerships with the poor and who are self-confident. With that self-confidence they will warn faculty and students alike away from serious cross-cultural mistakes and guide them through the dilemmas of a privileged visit to the global South. For their local knowledge is what will also guide you and your students toward the relationships of solidarity that our irrevocably intertwined globe most needs.



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*Thomas’s 2012 Service-Learning Faculty Award. A shorter version of this article appeared in the Spring 2013 issue of the UST publication **Companion**.*

Tags: cross-cultural service  
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