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COMMUNITY ACTION RESEARCH: A THREE-PART SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE MODEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a model for a three-part service-learning course developed by the Schreyer Honors College and Department of Geography at Penn State. Piloted during the spring, summer, and fall semesters of 2001, “Geography 298H--Experiences in International Service Learning: Juárez, Mexico” was designed to engage participants in a meaningful community development project while learning about the conditions, challenges, and prospects of a specific world region. After a semester of background preparation that included discussions with faculty members across many disciplines and team research resulting in a 148-page field guide, participating students traveled to Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, where they constructed a single-family home for recent migrants to the area. The students maintained written and photographic journals during the trip and submitted excerpts upon their return. During the fall semester, the class reconvened for several sessions of reflection and discussion; assignments comprised writing addenda to the field guide, editorials on some aspect of the trip that would be appropriate for publication in campus or hometown newspapers, and an open-ended evaluation of the experience. Throughout the process, students built leadership skills through networking, fund-raising, and making presentations to school students and civic groups in their home communities. The course is serving as a model for other service learning projects, notably “Geography 297H--Experiences in International Service Learning: HOINA, India” and “Architectural Engineering 297H: Tribal Housing.”

BACKGROUND

The Juárez project was the brainchild of Jane Peacock, director of the WIC nutrition program for the state of New Mexico and a Penn State alumna, and Cheryl Achterberg, Dean of Penn State’s Schreyer Honors College. The two have worked together on nutrition education projects for the past decade and a half. Their brainchild came to light in the form of a course developed and piloted in Penn State’s Department of Geography, entitled “International Experiences in Service Learning: Juárez, Mexico.” In keeping with the Schreyer Honors College’s four-part mission (academic excellence with integrity, internationalization, leadership development, and civic engagement) and the Department of Geography’s initiatives in global issues and service learning, the course was designed to engage participants in a meaningful community development project while learning about the conditions, challenges, and prospects of a specific world region, as well as to build leadership skills through teamwork, networking, fund-raising, and making presentations to school students and civic groups.

Class members were undergraduate Honors students, nearly three-quarters of whom had just completed their first year at Penn State. It was a life-transforming experience, not only for Dulce and Adolfo, the young couple for whom the group constructed the house that week, but

also for the twenty students and four instructors who labored physically and mentally to make it possible. Cheryl Achterberg has called it “the most uniformly powerful learning experience I have ever observed.”

Part I: Preparation

The group had worked throughout the spring 2001 semester to learn about the conditions, challenges, and prospects of the Juárez-El Paso border region. During class meetings, faculty from geography, women’s studies, architecture, landscape architecture, architectural engineering, and marketing shared their expertise on poverty, economic development, social and demographic characteristics of the area, reading the landscape, sustainable design practices, home construction, fund-raising, and service learning. Dr. Carolyn Tubbs, Faculty Residence Mentor for the Living-Learning Community of Atherton and Simmons Halls, brought a “taste of home” to her session: after sharing her experience of growing up in a bi-cultural neighborhood of El Paso, she surprised and delighted the class with a tasty treat of *pan dulce*, which her mother had purchased at a favorite Juárez bakery and shipped to University Park just for the class.

For almost all students, it was their first introduction to the discipline of geography and its integrative perspective. It was also their first foray into preparing publication-quality work. While each individual focused on a particular aspect of the *milieu* that comprises Ciudad Juárez, they worked together in teams of 3 or 4 to fashion coherent chapters on the landscape, population, infrastructure, politics and administration, economic development, and cultural patterns of the area. The result was a 148-page field guide, entitled *Geographic Perspectives on Ciudad Juárez, Mexico*.¹ The volume began with an overview of the physical landscape, land use, environmental concerns, and cultural landscape of the region. The next chapter discussed issues of demography, health, nutrition, and education. The third focused on housing and services available to Juárez residents. The fourth chapter surveyed historical and contemporary politics, border relations, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The fifth covered economic foundations of El Paso del Norte, the *maquiladora* industry, formal and informal sectors of Juárez’s contemporary economy, and the city’s economic development in the larger contexts of Mexico and the U.S. The final chapter offered insight into aspects of contemporary Mexican culture, including religion, holidays and celebrations, literature, theater, art, music and dance, and family entertainment.

But before the group could depart, the students had to raise \$3,000 to cover construction costs of the home they would build. They did this by drawing on community connections, linking university students with organizations and individuals in their home communities, and ultimately with the community in Ciudad Juárez in which they served. Participants received donations from high school student councils, church youth groups, Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs, building contractors, family, and friends. To thank these sponsors, the students sent postcards from the field and made presentations about the experience at group meetings in the summer and fall. Student travel was funded in part by Schreyer Ambassador Travel Grants, and a grant from the Kellogg Foundation Leadership for Institutional Change (LINC) Initiative helped to underwrite logistical expenses.

Part II: Participation

¹ An electronic version of the field guide is available on the course website at <http://web.shc.psu.edu/~juarez>. The field guide is also available at Penn State’s Paterno Library, call number HN120.C48G46 2001.

The group arrived in El Paso on Saturday, May 12 and crossed the border into Juárez on Sunday. After a tour of Arbol de Vida (Tree of Life) orphanage and playing with the children there, they toured the worksite in a *colonia* (shanty-town neighborhood) on the far western edge of Ciudad Juárez. The physical labor began on Monday. Tom Childers commented in his journal that day,

Yesterday, we had seen the cement foundation that was put in before we arrived, and today I was a little nervous because the time we actually begin the work that we had prepared for and anticipated for so long was so near. I had wondered with some of my classmates if we would be able to do what it took to build the house... Our first day soothed my worries as everyone was able to contribute in a significant way, and the coordinating instruction was smooth. We ended up working in small groups rather than as individuals or large groups and could accomplish many difficult tasks at once.

That “coordinating instruction” came primarily from Bob Blakemore, founder of *Manos de Dios* (Hands of God) mission and our construction leader. He was ably assisted by David Riley—Assoc. Professor of Architectural Engineering at Penn State; Rev. Dan Klooster—director of Gateway Mission Training Center, an El Paso organization that coordinates cross-cultural service experiences in Mexico for young people and adults from the United States; and Eufemio Loya—Bob’s apprentice, who goes by the moniker “Junior.” Board by board, the house frame went up, followed by drywall, chicken wire, and stucco. Eric Hough wrote in the group journal on Wednesday, May 16, our third day of construction:

“Woah,” was my initial reaction when we all pulled up to the worksite this morning. I must have been too tired to notice yesterday when we left, but today we had what actually looked like a house. It seemed as though it had just sprung out of the ground overnight...when I started framing the interior walls, I was still outside. But by the end of today, I stepped back and realized that I was all of a sudden inside a house. The front door became a front door, not just an area... I understood what Dean Achterberg meant when she said that it all starts out as a pile of lifeless materials but eventually it develops personality.

Marimar Aponte recalled the landscape in her group journal entry from Monday, May 14, “The view to both sides from the construction site was beautiful in two different ways. To one side we had the Anapra community with its characteristic small houses and smiles on people’s faces. To the other side we had an incredible panoramic view of the mountains.” She also remarked on the “non-pretty” side of Anapra, with its “[barbed] wires, covered by plastic trash bags that were thrown to the ground and blown by the wind,” that served as fences dividing property.

As a geographer, I was struck by the fact that from our worksite on the edge of Anapra, we could look to the west and see a tall white pylon on a dusty desert bluff, marking the point at which the states of Texas, New Mexico, and Chihuahua come together; look to the south and see the Juárez Mountains rising in the distance beyond the *colonias*; look to the east and see the bustling central business districts of Juárez and El Paso; and, most striking of all, look directly to the north to see the edge of Anapra pushing against the brown ditch of the Rio Grande—marking

the U.S.-Mexico border—and, in the distance, a swath of green along the base of the Franklin Mountains: the country clubs of El Paso, strikingly verdant compared to the arid *colonia* in which we worked.

But some of the most memorable aspects of the trip for many of the group occurred during interactions with the neighborhood children. Shortly after we arrived at the worksite, several children approached and offered to help with carrying boards, fetching tools, pounding nails. By mid-afternoon Tuesday, there remained few tasks with which the children could assist, so we formed play-teams to channel their energies constructively and keep them out of the workers' way. The kids enchanted us and exhausted us. Together we drew pictures, read stories, tossed a ball around, held a construction contest with scraps of wood, and played *caballito* (piggy-back rides). Then they showed us around their neighborhood: small groups visited a few of the kids' homes at different times during the week, and just before the house dedication on Friday, they proudly gave us a "grand tour." Mike Still shared in the group journal on Thursday, May 17:

I got to see Rosio, Jesus, and Rosalba's house today...Their family moved into Anapra from a town near Durango; they lost the kids' papers and can't afford the registration fee, so they cannot attend school...The thing that struck me about their house was that although there were few possessions and living conditions were cramped, everything seemed to be very well cared for... I saw a family of seven looking at difficulty, but still happy about life. That gave me hope.

We put the finishing touches on the house Friday morning and held a dedication ceremony after lunch. There wasn't a dry eye among us. Cori Thatcher observed in her journal that day,

Today was incredible...I was fine one minute, then the next thing I knew I was opening my mouth to ask Marimar to translate a thank you to the family for the experience they allowed us to have, and the tears just came flooding out...Today I finally felt a true connection with the people here in Mexico, in our little corner of Anapra. The children's laughter rang with an extra sweet sound today, and I just felt so...good!

One lesson the students learned rather quickly was that although secondary research offers an essential foundation for understanding a topic or situation, experiential learning provides a deeper level of understanding. Tom Bowler wrote in his journal on Thursday,

My highlight of this day was the reflection at the end of the day. This went on for about two hours. Everyone gave heart-felt insights on the experience, attesting to the amazing impact it had on each one of us. It became clear that there are many facets to an experience like this. The trip allowed us to create something with our hands that we can be proud of. It also brought the group closer together as friends. Finally, it allowed us to make a difference in the lives of people who truly needed our help...Tonight's reflection attests to the great potential of service learning to change the lives of students. Conventional classroom learning is educational, but it is easy to intellectualize the world's problems and forget that

they are real. This dispassionate distance cannot exist in a service-learning environment.

Lacey Wingard, one of two juniors on the trip, agreed, writing,

Before traveling to Juárez, I searched for information concerning the nutritional status of Mexico...Reading several books and articles, I felt that I had a good understanding of the food patterns and nutritional needs of Mexicans throughout the country... Nothing could have prepared me for the reality of Ciudad Juárez. It was not until Mexicans had faces and names that I began to understand the extent of their problems and even still, the beauty of their being. As we worked together in the community, my eyes were opened to the hungry people all around me.

Lacey returned to Juárez later in the summer to conduct research for her honors thesis, which deals with nutrition education. “My experience in Ciudad Juárez has greatly affected the way that I study nutrition,” She observed. “It has made a permanent impact on my life.”

The students concur. Christine MacAulay summed up the group’s sentiments in a journal entry from May 19, our last day in Juárez:

How do you describe one of the most incredible weeks of your life? This week has challenged me and changed me...this week has opened my mind, my eyes, and my heart. I have seen what it is to have a little but still have a lot... As we have demonstrated this week, there are people who want to make a difference. Maybe the landscape and the history and the landmarks will escape us, but hopefully the lives and the stories of the individuals we have been privileged to serve will be etched in our hearts forever.

Katie Myers wrote her entry in the group journal on the flight home from El Paso. She concluded,

This has been one of the most amazing experiences of my life. I hope to carry a sense of the incredibly wonderful opportunities I have been offered in life, for the rest of it. I will never forget the people, the culture, and the land of Juárez. And I will go back. It may be next year, or in thirty, but I am going back. Thank you everyone who has made this possible.

Part III: Reflection and Sharing

An essential element of *service learning* that distinguishes it from *service projects* is the reflection—on the service performed, its context, and its impacts upon the people served and serving—which occurs before, during, and after the actual experience. The follow-up for this experience consisted of several class meetings during which participants reflected orally and in writing on the Juárez experience. In her evaluation, one student described the course as follows:

The objective of this project was to provide a true service learning experience in the sense of incorporating three parts: preparation, action and reflection. The preparation part allowed us to become educated of the issues, landscape, culture

and lifestyle of those we would be working and also provided a chance for group members to get to know one another and bond as a group. The action part involved actually traveling to Ciudad Juarez, Mexico and working with Gateway Missions to accomplish our goal of building a home for a poor family while further examining the issues we had researched the previous semester. The reflection part of the trip was the culmination of our experience and had the objective of drawing conclusions and hypotheses from the things we learned and developing ways in which we could use the knowledge gained now and in the future.

Some students were initially disappointed by how different their research findings were compared with what they saw on site. But they came to realize that the partial knowledge they gained during the spring semester was extremely valuable, if incomplete. As a result, their first assignment when the class re-convened in the fall semester was for each student to write an addendum to the field guide, commenting on the similarities and differences between their secondary research and observation. Farzad Noubary noted in his addendum,

As a dynamic process, land use in Juárez is affected by so many interrelated, continually changing, and intangible forces that trying to capture them all in [secondary] research is extremely difficult... Although we can never escape our own biases, primary research in addition to secondary research brings us closer to the truth than either type can on its own.

For their second assignment, the students wrote editorials suitable for publication in campus or hometown newspapers, based on some aspect of what they researched, observed, or experienced during the course and/or trip. Themes on which they wrote included the politics of immigration and border relations; economic conditions and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); crime—notably drug trafficking and serial murders of young women in Juárez; culture and community; children and education; and community service and altruism. At least one editorial, that of Cori Thatcher, entitled “In Mexico, Reality Defined,” has been published in a local newspaper.

At the end of the fall semester, students completed a 17-item, open-ended evaluation (see Appendix). The same questions are being used across Schreyer Honors College-sponsored service-learning projects in order to improve upon each course and to draw comparisons among the projects.² Evaluations of the Juárez course were positive. All of the participants would recommend the course to other students, and some have already done so enthusiastically. Many of the suggestions for improvement concerned a perception of disorganization—particularly during the first semester—in terms of specific plans for the trip and fund-raising. These students did recognize, however, that most of the uncertainty resulted from the fact that this was the inaugural offering of the course and that they were helping to establish the groundwork on which future classes would build. One student wrote, “This was its first year, so, of course, there were lots of bumps along the way, but it was organized to be as educational and also life-changing.” Another noted,

² As of spring 2002, projects include Juárez, Mexico; HOINA-India (both offered through the department of geography); and Tribal Housing (offered through architectural engineering).

The class let me learn a lot about not only Juarez Mexico, but also Penn State, because I got to see the class being created, as well as taking it and learning its content. I think that made the class very difficult as well as educational. While it gave some flexibility, such as in the assignments, and the meeting times, it also forced us to meet Friday afternoons, and even during canning weekends! It also forced us to be patient, as many of the details of the class were not prepared well in advance. That aspect did not bother me too much, but I can see where the vagueness of the plans frustrated other people at first.

The following three evaluation excerpts illustrate the range of impacts the Juarez experience had on participating students:

This project met and exceeded my expectations. To be perfectly honest, I felt a little shaky going into it. I cared about the information we had learned, but not having been there, it still seemed more distant and impersonal. I also had a feeling that the work we were going to be doing was maybe just a kick-fix handout kind of thing. I was also worried because I didn't know many of the other group members as well as they seemed to know each other. As it turns out, I realized that our work truly was valuable and the lessons derived are priceless, and the people that I had the privilege of spending that week with are some of the kindest, most interesting people I have met.

When we were leaving the work site for the last time, I knew that we would probably never see those kids again. And though we could leave and return to a comfortable life, life for those kids would continue to be hard. I was crying and I looked at Tom and he was crying, I think at that moment I understood exactly why we had come there. It's not enough just to understand the world, you have to go out and be a part of it. Sitting in the basement of Atherton and reading about what Juarez is like, the problems and the poverty would not have reduced me to tears. I needed to first become a part of place.

Before entering the classroom, I assumed that the Juarez project's main focus was on community service and the personal work and rewards that are intrinsic parts of such service. However, I believe that the most rewarding objective turned out to be the challenge to compare primary and secondary research about the community in which our service was performed. This objective connected academics, emotions, and service, therefore providing a much greater, educated, meaningful impact.

Thinking about such impacts, Cheryl Achterberg observed “Service learning differs from volunteerism because it is a planned activity that *integrates* academic learning with service to the community or society.” She continued,

Service learning is powerful. It is also an ideal means through which to teach leadership. It is the kind of learning that keeps teaching, long after the student has left the ‘classroom.’ For some students, even a single service learning

experience can be life changing. This course was a good example. Although service learning is costly, I am convinced that it's a sound investment and an important development in teaching and learning.

David Riley noted, “As an educator, one of the most compelling elements of this kind of project is that the students go down there thinking that they’re providing a service, helping people out. But they go through a transition during the experience, realizing that it’s more than the bricks they carry, holes they dig, walls they put up—they gain tremendously from the experience themselves. That’s really gratifying to see.”

The writings and conversations of the Juárez participants reflect sentiments of appreciation, accomplishment, and hope. Students returned from the experience with a broader perspective on living conditions along the Texas-Mexico border and/or global issues, as well as new perspectives on their own lives and potential contributions to society. Several participants are enrolled or intend to enroll in advanced courses on poverty and development issues, and many have expressed a desire to continue their involvement in service-learning projects and leadership initiatives. Their enthusiasm has generated a great deal of interest among other Schreyer Scholars to participate in future service-learning projects. Student evaluations of the project were positive, and the course or elements from it are serving as a model for service-learning initiatives in departments of architectural engineering, geography, and landscape architecture.

REFERENCE

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

JoAnn C. Vender is a Ph.D. candidate in Penn State's Department of Geography. During the 2000-01 and 2001-02 academic years, she served as Assistant Coordinator of Student Programs for the Schreyer Honors College and, with Cheryl Achterberg, was the coordinating instructor for the Juárez course.

Appendix: Geog 298H, Fall 2001 – Class Evaluation

Experiences in International Service Learning—Juarez, Mexico

(Please say what you can on all of these issues, even if after reflecting on the matter you realize that you haven't reached firm conclusions or judgments.)

1. Describe Juarez (the project on which you worked) as it appeared to you: its objectives, organization, leadership, staff, location, etc.
2. Why did you choose to participate in this project?
 - a. What did you hope to get out of it? (Academically, socially, morally, etc.)
 - b. Were you surprised at any level?
3. Describe the kind of work you performed, how much you worked, with whom, your daily pattern, etc.
4. Why was your work needed? Was your work of value? In what ways and to whom? Was it of value to you?
5. How would you describe the overall impact of your experience?
 - a. In what ways was that impact different from what you would expect in a traditional classroom?
6. Did your service and overall experience change the way you think about some things? Please explain.
7. In what ways has your definition of “development” and/or “globalization” changed?
8. Can you recall an instance or example from your experiences in Juarez that enabled you to see the underlying “theories” of the course?
9. What, if any, ethical questions (for example, about fairness/justice, freedom, responsibility, etc.) have the experience raised or illuminated for you?
10. In thinking about the service component of the project, what is your most lasting memory?
11. To what extent did the project meet or fail to meet your expectations?
12. Is there any preparation activity, service, or resource that would have made it easier for you to participate in the project and achieve your goals?
13. Is there anything that might have made the experience more **meaningful** for you?
14. Are there any aspects of the project that should NOT under any circumstances be changed or deleted?
15. What do you see as the area that needs the most improvement?
16. Have you recommended this course to anyone else? What did you say or would you say?
17. Please include any other comments that you would like to make.