

A Personal Perspective of Service Learning in International Schools

by Dr. Gregory A. Hedger, Director, Qatar Academy

Like many people who begin a career in international education, my wife and I initially left the United States in 1992 and went overseas for a two year experience. We were intrigued by the idea of involving ourselves in this loose affiliation of schools that had sprouted up around the world to meet the educational needs of children of expatriate business people and members of the diplomatic corps. Our understanding was that the goal of these schools is to provide educational opportunities for these students that replicated as closely as possible the education they would have received had they stayed in their home country. As experienced teachers in the U.S., my wife and I deemed ourselves to be adequately qualified to meet this goal.

Our first overseas positions took us to the American School of Bucharest, Romania, shortly after the fall of communism there. This was an exciting time to experience Romania. There were very few expatriates in the country, and it still had the taste of the Ceaucescu era when traffic lights were turned off on weekends because so few cars were in use, grocery stores were full of empty shelves, and the corner market was introducing bananas to the country for the first time. With so few expatriate colleagues, we found ourselves immersed in the local culture, spending the weekends exploring the countryside, experimenting with the language, and interacting with a local population that in some cases hadn't seen a foreigner since the Germans left at the end of World war II. For us, it was a period of time richly rewarding in new and varied cultural experiences.

At school, we were also finding ourselves intrigued by an experience we had never had before. It was an amazing sense of belonging and community that was more fulfilling than anything we had experienced at home. The school was more than a center of education. It was also a focal point for the expatriate community. It was the one place where people in a foreign

land, from various different countries and cultures, were able to come together and feel a sense of togetherness and shared experiences. Between the rich culture we were experiencing outside the school, and the strong sense of community we experienced at school, it wasn't long before my wife and I found ourselves committed to international educational careers, and a two year experience quickly expanded to a lifetime.

At the same time, we soon realized the very sensations that enticed us to make living internationally a lifetime endeavor were also some of the greatest challenges we were confronted with as educators. The international school environment, with students coming from a large number of different countries, seems to be a perfect opportunity to promote multicultural acceptance and understanding. In fact, most international schools make such a claim in their mission, values statements, or other literature. The reality is in many ways they do. However, it is also true a certain level of cultural misunderstanding is indirectly promoted through the way international schools operate and engage within the local community.

In many cases, international schools operate in isolation, creating something of an expatriate "ghetto" mentality. As a result of their ties to home governments, or educational systems in other countries, many schools operate separate from local laws. Similarly, the community center sensation my wife and I found so attractive in an international school, also contributes to a growing separateness between the local population and the school population. We have seen this contribute to negative perceptions of the local population and paternalistic attitudes in conflict with the intercultural engagement that takes place inside the school between families. While students in international schools seem to be more open to different cultural experiences, an extra effort is needed to promote meaningful and positive interaction with the local community. It has been my experience service learning is an ideal means of accomplishing this.

Our experience in international education took us from Romania to Indonesia, followed by Pakistan, the Cayman Islands, and now Qatar. At each school we've had a similar experience. We were enthralled with the close sense of community within the school, but also found that extra effort was needed to promote understanding and interaction with the larger community outside of the school – whether that be the larger community around the school, or even the larger global community. When service has been encouraged that includes the key components of clear learning objectives, learning strategies, and assessment, as well as reflection, students become more engaged with the community outside the school, and cultural understanding extends beyond the wall of the school building.

One of the things I've found interesting as we've moved from school to school is the different format of service learning experiences. It seems most service learning falls into one of three models. The first of these is an experience initiated by an individual teacher or teachers. It may occur around a single event, or perhaps a single educational objective. This is the most common model I've come across. This type of experience tends to be very effective because of the sense of ownership that exists amongst those involved in the experience. An obvious downfall of this model is not all students are involved meaning only a small group gains from the experience. Another downfall is the experience is often a one-time occurrence.

A perfect example of the type of service learning model described is one I was involved with while teaching at the Caltex American School in Indonesia. This project was actually student initiated and occurred shortly after the events of September 11, 2001. At the time, there had been a number of mosque fires in the U.S. Having the experience of living in the largest Muslim country in the world, these middle school students who were mostly American, wanted to reach out to the U.S. Muslim community and try to bridge any divide that was developing. They felt the best way they could do this was to contribute to the rebuilding of these burned mosques.

Sensing an opportunity for a one time service learning experience, we brainstormed with the students a way we could meet their goal while also incorporating learning objectives. What evolved was an idea to develop a cookbook. Using learning standards from English and I.T., these students designed a cookbook based upon both local and family recipes. Students then sold the cookbook to raise funds. They didn't stop there though. They also wanted to use this as a catalyst to bring the community together, so they designed an international banquet where they cooked recipes from the cookbook and sold tickets to the banquet. Funds from both the cookbook and banquet went to help rebuild mosques. As a part of the learning assessment, students were assessed using a rubric on their writing in the cookbook and a reflection, as well as their design skills. Though a onetime experience, this evolving process contained the important components of a meaningful service learning experience.

Another model I've come across quite often is one in which a school has put in place the structures to make sure an experience becomes embedded in the curriculum in some way so students are able to consistently learn from the experience. This model is one that engages students in the greatest level of learning while also being involved in a service. A possible downside is the possibility of no faculty buy-in, meaning the quality of the experience may vary.

The first time I was personally engaged in this model of service learning was again at Caltex American School. The school had a tradition of having students grow rice in traditional rice paddies every few years as a way of learning something about the local community. One year, we decided to take this further. Including the whole K thru grade 8 school, we decided to build a unit around rice. The whole school incorporated rice as a means of learning, whether using it as a counting tool in lower grades, learning to make rice flour, creating models of villages, or learning the economics of rice, everyone learned about rice. Outside the school building, we planted rice paddies with each class of older students working with a class of younger students to plant, grow, and harvest their paddy. In addition, local rice farmers were

invited in to teach our students the proper techniques, with the harvest being shared with these farmers and their families. At the end, a giant rice celebration was held with students sharing their learning through a range of interactions that were both reflective and designed around curricular standards.

Later, while at the Cayman International School in the Cayman Islands, we built upon the rice experience and developed service learning around the same model. Here, a month was set-aside during each school year in which the entire school focused on a concept of development. For example, in a manner similar to the rice unit, one year the focus was on water. The whole school learned about water from simple water experiments to exploration of the local reefs. Students learned about the importance of water in commerce, trade, agriculture, health, and simple survival. As a part of the service component, students were involved in clean-up efforts in the sea surrounding the island, and also raised funds to build a well. Finally, reflection activities and assessment were on-going throughout the unit. As with the rice unit, the important components for meaningful service learning provided engagement with the wider community permitting service learning to work as a medium for promoting multicultural understanding.

The final model I've come across in international schools promoting service learning is one in which there is a sequential development of the kind and amount of service students are engaged in as they grow older. This model often includes the counting of hours and is the type I've seen most often in schools associated with the International Baccalaureate (IB). While a great way to promote an ethic of service in a school, there is the potential drawback that students may begin to see service as a burden, or even worse, that a school falls into the practice of simply counting hours and loses the "learning" part of the concept of "service learning."

The school I am presently at, Qatar Academy, has probably one of the best examples I've come across of this model in the middle years as a part of the community and service program. Though a bit different from other international schools in that the student population

is largely Qatari, or Arab, there is still the tendency to lose touch with the larger community outside of the school, especially given the economic demographics of the school. The service learning component has become an important means of staying engaged with that larger community. Robust and rigorous, it requires students to be involved in supported learning and service opportunities from a menu of options in the lower grades and evolves into independent opportunities in middle grades in which students choose from a variety of options that require them to pursue a service plan of action and control their own reflective practice. The program ends in the higher grades where students individually design their own service learning experiences in which the primary criterion is the “significance and actual service to the community.”

This is a small sampling of some of the service learning I’ve come across in international schools. I could go on and on. What I’ve learned though is the important role service learning can, and does, play in the important job of promoting multicultural acceptance and understanding and helps these schools avoid the natural isolative nature they are prey to. That said, the service experience is not enough by itself. The key is the tie in learning, reflection, and engagement with the larger community.