

Service learning in India

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Introduction

I have always enjoyed trying to do two things at once. Watching TV while ironing, talking on the phone while driving (hands free of course), and eating breakfast while reading are three recommended combinations. It feels great to be able to combine two tasks that compliment each other. In fact, at times, you would be considered a little strange if you were to do one task without the other. Ironing, by itself, is mundane, using your mobile in a stationary position is contradictory, and I am yet to see anyone reading the Weet-bix packet at a time other than during breakfast. Some things are meant to be done together. As we are discovering at Avondale College, 'learning to teach' and 'service learning' is another such pairing.

"Service-Learning is often defined as an approach to teaching and learning in which service and learning are blended in a way that both occur and are enriched by the other" (Jeffrey, Anderson & Kevin, 2001). For the past two years a group of pre-service teachers studying at Avondale College have chosen to complete one of their practicum requirements in schools in India. This option forms part of a new Service-Learning Initiative offered in the Faculty of Education. This initiative gives education students the opportunity to gain practical teaching experience in a school where their skills, educational background, and willingness to serve are desperately needed.

On June 21, 2008, a group of nineteen people, seventeen students and two lecturers, boarded a plane from Sydney to Calcutta, then travelled to the remote town of Bodh Gaya in northern India. The plan was to place the pre-service teachers in one of two schools that had been set up for poor and orphaned children who would otherwise have no access to education. The local teachers in the schools had no training and little teaching experience. Having the pre-service teachers work alongside the local teachers created an exciting learning opportunity for all involved. Not only were the school students exposed to new ways of learning but both the pre-service teachers and local teachers learned about creating a learning environment and facilitating learning.

There is no doubt in my mind that we were able

to have an impact on the schools and community we went to serve. Presently, the two schools have a combined enrolment of over two hundred students. Without the support of the Avondale College pre-service teacher groups, the schools would most likely be closed. The pre-service teachers (this is the second year of this project) have been able to serve this community by going there to offer practical assistance and support; in addition, they've also raised money to purchase resources for the schools. In the two years that I have been leading this project, I have seen the schools change, the teachers develop and most importantly the school children grow as a direct result of the time and support that the pre-service teachers have provided.

Despite the fact that the impact on the local school and community was beyond what was expected or even hoped for, this has not been the focus of the memories shared by the pre-service teachers. Conversations are dominated not by what was achieved or the service performed but by what was learned as a result. We are the ones who have changed, we are the ones who have new hope, and we are the ones who have experienced growth.

The pre-service teachers were required to maintain a journal in which they recorded and reflected on their teaching and learning experiences. The comments below are extracts from these journals; they highlight the fact that when service and learning come together, each one enhances the other. The result is a rich learning experience.

We learnt about the world's needs

"By the time we had travelled by taxi from the airport to our hotel in Calcutta, I felt like I had landed on another planet. I knew that India would be different, but could never have imagined or been prepared for what we experienced." (Jared Martin)

"Lining every street are bodies. How do any of them survive? I feel unsafe. How do they survive? What do they eat? Maybe rice? Where does it come from? So many bodies. What problems could we have that could compare to this? We are here. We have seen. How can we speak so casually of what we see? My heart is breaking. I am helpless. But I cannot be distant. I see them when I close my eyes. So many sleeping. They have nowhere to go. There are so many. Too many! I don't want to look, to stare. But I don't want to forget." (Elyse Cameron)

Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

"Our trip to India revealed the need that exists in the world today and, more importantly, the responsibility we have to answer that need." (Sandro Bastos)

We learnt about the value of education

"I will never forget how grateful and eager to learn these kids are. It has shown me the great need for education in the world. The world needs me." (Krystle Fisher)

"Today was amazing. I left school feeling like I had accomplished something great!" (Ashleigh Bell)

"Even though they tell you all your life how valuable education is I never really understood this until India. Knowledge and education is such a craved and treasured commodity there. Students are just bursting to know more, to learn about the world and to become something better. I felt so privileged to be able to share with them the knowledge I have, to inspire them to learn more, to show them a God who cares." (Jess McNeill)

"Seeing a school with so little, where the students want so much to be helped, reminds me of the value of education. We take this gift for granted every day of our lives." (Elyse Taylor)

We learnt about teaching effectively

"For me it was exciting to see how the kids' enthusiasm to learn grew and grew the more they were exposed to our teaching strategies. It was so rewarding and it reminded me what being a teacher is all about ... I still can't believe they thrashed us in cricket!" (Klinton Neirinckx)

"I learnt today that teaching can not happen without trust." (Jessica Merchant)

"No day so far has followed the exact plan I mapped out; however, it has emphasised the importance of being flexible." (Kaylee Robbie)

"I realised that if I just have fun, they learn so much better. Obviously we've been told this over and over but I saw it in action today." (Jessica Merchant)

"I have learnt that with a little patience, creativity and love anybody can learn." (Emma Keegan)

"Today seemed extra challenging for some reason. The kids seemed to be really restless and rowdy. I learnt, through the struggles of using a translator, that good teaching is not just content, it's more about how it is delivered." (Kaylee Robbie)

"I learnt the importance of allowing the children to show their work to others. It gives a sense of accomplishment to the student." (Josh Smith)

"I'm finding the lack of resources and computer access frustrating but it is making me so much more appreciative of the privileges we have in Australia. While I am struggling a little bit now with planning my lessons, this experience will make me more creative and resourceful as a teacher." (Kaylee Robbie)

"Yesterday we had the students stick craft materials onto the shape of numbers. Today we integrated

Mathematics into Physical Education. The kids appeared to really enjoy the classes and were able to learn in a fun way. It worked really well. We are getting better at integrating a range of different subjects into one lesson." (Patrice Patel)

We learnt about teaching students from a different culture

"This trip has helped me understand more of Indian life and culture and how different other cultures can be. This will make me more culturally aware and accepting in my own classroom." (Kaylee Robbie)

"We are all equal—no matter who we are or where we live or what we do." (Ashleigh Bell)

We learnt about the value of service

"Seeing all the poverty in Calcutta was a really big eye opener for me. When I teach back home I will be really intentional about making sure my students are aware of how fortunate they are. I would also like to instil in my students the value of service and selflessness so that my students can make a difference in the world that we live in." (Kaylee Robbie)

We learnt about how to love

"Even through their poverty, they showed such kindness and love and were the highlight of my trip." (Natasha Knopper)

"The relationships we built have enticed us to continue a bond of friendship with these people." (Andy Matthes)

"Bright orange garlands were thrown around our necks and all the children stood around us, singing a welcome song. For the next two hours, I was showered in petals, my skin touched and pulled and children climbed all over me. It was a truly humbling experience." (Mikaela Prout)

For the first 17 years in Calcutta, Mother Teresa worked as a Geography teacher and then as a Principal at Saint Mary's High School. Like all great teachers, she had the ability to combine the art of teaching with the act of service. From my experience with this project, learning to serve is an integral part of effective teaching and I can think of no better tool for creating effective teachers than giving them the opportunity to teach, serve and learn all at the same time.

This sentiment was summed up by Mikaela Prout, one of the pre-service teachers, when she wrote, "India is amazing, the teaching experience invaluable and personally, it has changed my life!" **TEACH**

Reference

Jeffrey, B., Anderson, K. J., & Swick, J. Y. (Eds.) (2001). *Service-learning in teacher education: Enhancing the growth of new teachers, their students, and communities*. Washington DC: AACTE Publications.



[Photography: India Team]