

**Using Service-Learning as a Tool to Develop Intercultural Understanding**

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## Using Service-Learning as a Tool to Develop Intercultural Understanding

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**Abstract:** Service-learning provides a wide range of opportunities for students to develop intercultural understanding. As a practice, service-learning has the potential to strengthen the development of student attitudes that support collaboration between people of different cultural groups. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the ways in which engaging in international service-learning could be used to leverage students' development of intercultural understanding. Nineteen urban high school students from a predominantly low socioeconomic status (SES) school engaged in a service-learning experience for 2 weeks in Costa Rica. This manuscript chronicles the process and procedures undertaken to prepare and engage students throughout the service-learning process and highlights the understandings that were cultivated.

*Key words:* service-learning, intercultural competence, Costa Rica, high school

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Intercultural competence is “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world” (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 7). For our schools, where multiculturalism is becoming the norm as student populations are increasingly represented by a wide and often diverse array of students from multiple countries and cultures (Kena et al., 2015), developing intercultural competence is a vital component of a positive school culture. What we have learned from research is that developing intercultural competence is not an intrinsically innate ability. Rather, it is a set of dispositions, capabilities, a mindset—that people learn and develop (DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009). Promoting intercultural competence requires thoughtful, intentional consideration and active engagement, and it necessitates that we actively work to encourage international understanding. In other words, we must find ways to support our students' development of knowledge and positive attitudes towards other cultures (Perry & Southwell, 2011).

One way that educators can work to help bolster the development of intercultural understanding is through service-learning. Service-learning is a pedagogical method that integrates service activities with academic content and structured reflection on the service experience (Wade & Yarbrough, 2007). Service-learning is a natural fit in social studies education as it is considered to be one of the best ways that schools can develop competent and responsible citizens (Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE, 2003).

Service-learning can be a valuable component for building intercultural understanding as it has the potential to strengthen the development of student attitudes that support collaboration between people of different cultural groups. International service-learning, specifically, has been found to promote attitudes such as increased global awareness and intercultural understanding, enhanced civic mindedness, and the development of more humane values among participants (Crabtree, 2008). Our purpose in this manuscript is to share an example of international service-learning in action and illustrate how the experience served to augment students' development of intercultural understanding.

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### Theoretical Foundation

“Service-learning is an approach to teaching and learning in which students use academic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs” (National Youth Leadership Council, n.d., para. 1). Moreover, as Koenig (2013) highlights, service-learning is a strategy that strengthens academic, civic, and character outcomes. It channels youth passion and creativity into an opportunity to make real change in the world around them.

Service-learning activities may include direct service in which students interact with the people receiving the service, indirect service in which students engage in activities that will help a community as a whole, advocacy activities in which students encourage action or awareness of a public issue, or research activities that produce information related to a topic of public interest (Florida State University Center for Leadership and Civic Education, 2009). Regardless of the type of activity, it is vital that it is “well designed” and incorporates “sufficient preparation; reflection; and intervention plans during the experience and adequate debriefing after the experience” (Shalabi, 2014, p. 99). The National Youth Leaders Council’s K-12 Service Learning Standards for Quality Practice (2008) provides a set of eight criteria for effective service learning experiences:

- Meaningful service – actively engages students in meaningful and relevant service activities
- Link to curriculum – intentionally used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards
- Reflection – multiple challenging reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one’s relationship to society
- Diversity – promotes understanding of diversity, mutual respect among all participants
- Youth voice – provides students an opportunity to plan, implement, evaluate service learning experience with guidance with adults
- Partnerships – collaborative, mutually beneficial, address community needs
- Progress monitoring – engages students in ongoing processes to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals, uses results or improvement and sustainability
- Duration and intensity – sufficient to address community needs and meet specified outcomes

Service-learning can take place in both domestic and international contexts, but international service-learning (ISL) has some distinctions since it usually involves immersing students for a prolonged period of time in a supported environment that is significantly different than their home environment (Kiely, 2005). This prolonged immersion allows for shifts in students’ affective processes that help lead to shifts in attitudes related to intercultural understanding (Kiely, 2008). ISL has been found to increase participant sensitivity to cross-cultural issues and awareness of global realities (Rodriguez, 2011). Students who participated in service-learning during an interdisciplinary study abroad preparation course and during their time abroad indicated that their time abroad and the cultural experiences they had there “challenged them to rethink their own values and those of the [other]”, and they “showed an improved understanding of multicultural education and intercultural concepts” (Smith & Moreno-Lopez, 2012, pp. 369 & 370).

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The potential of service-learning to serve as a conduit for developing international understanding is immense. The experience and study described within this manuscript were guided by this framework of thinking about service-learning, and they function to help demonstrate what service-learning can meaningfully look like in action.

### **Methodology and Design**

A naturalistic, qualitative research design was employed to investigate this study's research question: In what ways can service-learning be leveraged as a tool to develop students' intercultural understanding? As a naturalistic research design, this study generated data from participants in a natural setting, illuminating how they make sense of their experiences, and drawing upon inductive data analysis to arrive at data themes (Hatch, 2002). A variety of sources were used including journals, blog postings and interviews to triangulate emerging understandings and increase the overall validity of study results (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

### **Participants**

Participants were part of the International Service Learning (ISL) Program at Challenge Charter High School. The school is located in Riverton, a mid-sized city in the U.S. Mid-Atlantic region (all proper names are pseudonyms). The school website reports that student body is 56% African American and 39% white, 81% city residents, and 61% free or reduced-price lunch recipients. Program participants were selected through an application process open to 11th and 12th grade students. Preference was given to students with limited travel experience, and scholarships were provided so that the cost would not prohibit participation. There were 19 ISL program participants, 18 of which consented to participate in this study and provided responses.

### **ISL Program**

The ISL program at Challenge Charter High, designed to meet the K-12 Service Learning Standards for Quality Practice criteria, had four goals: enable students to experience personal growth through new challenges, familiarize students with different ways of addressing social problems, promote environmental awareness, and introduce students to the world outside of their region. The country of Costa Rica was selected as the site for the international experience because it is an interesting case study of a society addressing a number of social and environmental problems in different ways than in the United States. A Costa Rican tour company specializing in service-learning trips for high school students was utilized to arrange the in country travel, logistics, and experiences of the project.

Students participated in a number of activities throughout the year to prepare them for the experience in Costa Rica. These activities included a day-long service-learning activity in the fall, fundraising during winter months, and a 7-week preparation course in the late spring. The program culminated in a 12-day trip to Costa Rica in early summer. In the fall, students participated in a day-long service-learning activity that involved clearing brush and dead trees in a local state park. The service was followed by a discussion about the importance of participating in community activities and a comparison to the service work students would perform in Costa Rica. This type of activity was selected because program leaders wanted students to engage in service similar to the work they would do in Costa Rica and also focus on

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getting to know one another, rather than getting to know the recipients of a direct service activity. In the spring, students completed a 35-hour preparation course. This Social Studies/Science dual elective course included an introduction to cultural foundations, political topics including Costa Rican current events and history, and environmental topics such as an introduction to rainforest ecology and sustainable development practices. The second author was the program leader and also taught the social studies components of the course. The course also offered limited Spanish language practice via two rounds of email exchanges with students at a Costa Rican high school and four Survival Spanish lessons with one of the school's Spanish teachers.

### ***Costa Rica Experience***

The experience in Costa Rica included 5 days in the capital city of San Jose, 5 days in the Bosque Alto rainforest community, and 2 days for rest and transit. Students began their experience in San Jose and participated in the following activities there: completing a 2-day service project in the El Tigre neighborhood, meeting and interviewing two Costa Rican political leaders, visiting a local dairy co-op and interviewing a co-op leader, visiting a traditional Costa Rican mask maker and interviewing the maker about the craft, attending a group salsa lesson at a local night club, visiting a Costa Rican high school and meeting with the students they had connected with as pen pals, and visiting an active volcano. The second part of the experience was in the Bosque Alto rain forest community. Activities in Bosque Alto included a 3-day service project, playing a soccer game with community members, attending a pig roast, and interviewing the leader of the Bosque Alto environmental tourism organization that sponsored the group's stay. The rest and transit days included a 2-hour zip line experience in the rain forest and an afternoon at the beach.

Two direct service projects were selected for this experience as they allowed participants to have face-to-face contact with service recipients (Florida State University Center for Leadership and Civic Education, 2009). Costa Ricans who lived in the communities receiving the service directed both service projects, protecting the integrity of local stakeholders. Members of the El Tigre Citizens Association, a grassroots neighborhood organization, directed the service project in their San Jose neighborhood. El Tigre is a squatter community that was not recognized by the Costa Rican government and did not receive city services such as road maintenance or garbage collection. In order to receive these services, the community needed to complete certain tasks such as paving all roads. Community members were pleased that Challenge Charter High students were willing to assist them pave road sections by mixing and spreading cement using simple tools such as shovels and pick axes. The community group ensured that many community members worked alongside of students during the 2 service days to allow for one-to-one interactions.

The Bosque Alto service project was directed by members of the Bosque Alto Eco-tourism Collective, a non-profit collective that organized eco-tourism activities to provide income to the farmers living in the area. Bosque Alto had one primary school, and the project consisted of building a cement blockhouse for the school's only teacher. A cement blockhouse is a typical incentive to attract teachers to work in rural Costa Rican communities like Bosque Alto. A number of young men in the community led students in construction of this house and interacted with students. The president of the collective presided over the construction and had organized the group's stay.

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Students engaged in a number of reflection activities during their time in Costa Rica. The group met for hour-long discussions each evening that included time to share and reflect on their experiences as well as discuss logistics for the next day. As the program leader, the second author facilitated most of these discussions. Students were also frequently directed to engage in critical incident journaling during these meetings and were given specific journal prompts relating to the Albert (1996) framework, a tool by which to help participants think about the context of life in Latin America. Finally, all students were asked to post a blog entry on the class blog site at least once while in Costa Rica. The blog was managed by a teacher-chaperone who ensured that a variety of students participated, that all student work was edited for grammar and clarity, and that the blog had pictures to communicate the experience to supporters in the United States.

Although language development was not a focus of this program, it was an added bonus for some students. Those who could speak some Spanish had opportunities to converse with Costa Ricans every day, particularly during the service-learning projects. Chaperones and peers translated for students who spoke no Spanish.

### ***Data Generation***

Data emerged from the following sources: pre- and post-questionnaires, student journals, blog postings, and interviews with a representative sample of participants. Analysis of the journals enabled us to see how the students understood their experiences in Costa Rica via a written format not intended for a specific audience, and allowed us to get perspectives from all participants, not just the ones interviewed. Analyzing blog postings allowed us a different look into how participants understood their experiences, as these entries were written to communicate their experiences with a public audience. These two unobtrusive data sources were useful in triangulating other data sources such as interviews because some participants could be more comfortable communicating through writing, they provide an alternative perspective on the participants' experience, and they are relatively easy to collect (Hatch, 2002). Interviews were selected as a data source because interviewing enables researchers to see the world through perspectives other than their own (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Furthermore, interviewing multiple people about the same phenomenon helps researchers describe complex processes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), such as intercultural learning.

*Student journals.* Participants were required to keep a journal during their time in Costa Rica, and journals from all 18 consenting participants were analyzed. Students could write in their journals whenever they liked, and knew that these journals would be copied at the end of the experience for research purposes. Students were directed to write about cultural incidents during the evening group meetings using focus prompts based on the Albert (1996) framework they had explored during the pre-trip preparation. This format was used because journal writing that responds to specific prompts has been found to be effective in describing intercultural growth among students participating in an ISL program (Hendershot & Sperandio, 2009), and using a cultural framework to write about ISL program experiences has been found to be particularly useful in promoting intercultural growth (Parker & Dautoff, 2007).

*Blog postings.* During their time in Costa Rica students posted voluntarily on a class blog site, and blog postings from all 18 consenting participants were analyzed. These posts were different in content and

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style from the journals as they did not respond to structured prompts and they were written on a public blog site for sponsors and loved ones. Students were simply asked to describe their personal experience of trip activities in the past day. Students described their impressions of Costa Rica, wrote about meaningful experiences, and recounted challenges that they had overcome such as trying new foods or completing exhausting physical labor in the service-learning projects. A chaperone ensured at least one student posted to the blog every day the group had Internet access (all but four days), and sometimes up to three students a day posted to the blog.

*Interviews.* Five students were interviewed on the day the group returned from Costa Rica. This sample size is a little over a quarter of the 18 consenting participants, and provided for perspectives that varied by race and gender. As the Costa Rica experience occurred in the summer, interviewing more than this representative sample after the group's return to the United States was logistically prohibitive. The set of interviews represents our best attempt to reach the goals of interview data saturation and sufficiency given the realities that prevented the second author from interviewing all subjects (Seidman, 2006). Respondents included one white male, one African American male, one white female, and two African American females. Interview questions included:

- What activities on the trip had the greatest impact on you?
- How do you think this trip has changed you and your view of the world?
- What do you think is the difference between an American citizen and a global citizen? Are you one, the other, both, or neither? Did any trip activities influence your answer?
- Are Americans morally responsible for problems people have in Costa Rica? Did any trip activities influence your answer?
- Did you meet any Costa Ricans on this trip who particularly influenced you or contributed to your learning? Who did you meet and what did you learn from them?

Technology malfunctions prevented analysis of the interview with the African American male student, so only the remaining four interviews are considered in the findings.

*Pre- and post-experience surveys.* Students were given a seven item survey the day before they left for Costa Rica. They completed the same survey again on the day that they returned to the U.S. after the Costa Rica experience. Students were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1 (not competent) to 4 (very competent) with respect to the following statements:

1. I am knowledgeable about contemporary international and global issues.
2. I understand how economic, political, cultural, technological, and environmental forces impact current global issues and problems.
3. I understand how the process of globalization (global interdependence) affects the national interests of the US and those of other countries.
4. I understand the complexities of intercultural relationships and communication.
5. I am knowledgeable about other languages and cultures.
6. I am good at seeing issues from another person or group's perspective.
7. I can place myself in the shoes of someone who has had very different life experiences than I have.

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The first and third authors analyzed the qualitative data to identify salient patterns and themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and examined the survey data to discern any emergent trends. The following section highlights major elements that emerged from this corpus of data.

### **Findings**

While there are many themes that emerged from the data, there were four major components we found relevant for our purposes in examining how the students were exploring and building their intercultural understanding through this project: changing mindsets, engaging in meaningful work in a cross-cultural context, learning about the other, and seeing the bigger picture. The themes were often interwoven throughout participant responses. While these themes are fluid and overlapping, they serve as the basis for our exploration of the development of intercultural understanding that took place during the service-learning experience. Each focal theme is explored in the following sections and examples of student responses are shared.

#### ***Changing Mindsets***

One major theme that emerged from the data was the perspective-altering nature of this experience. Students were immersed in a new culture. The opportunities this presented to students to see, experience, and think about life from another vantage point created meaningful spaces for reflection and perspective shifting. Other ways of thinking and being were discovered, realizations about others and the self were uncovered, and mindsets were altered. As one student wrote,

I used to question whether or not this trip would be life changing or if I would get anything out of it. The truth is that this trip changed my life and the way I view many things. I also learned that I can do a lot more than I think I can if I just take the time to try. (Thomas, July 1, 2011, blog post)

Likewise, another student reflected on that the experience had changed the way in which he viewed what he was able to do: "My Eureka moment was this whole trip. . . . I was so shocked . . . that I could accomplish all that" (Jeffrey, June 30, 2011, journal).

Through this experience, participants were exposed to new realities, asked to think and work in ways they had not before, and came to understand that there are not only other ways of thinking and doing, but that they, too, could engage in learning through this.

#### ***Engaging in Meaningful Work in a Cross Cultural Context***

Another theme that emerged centered on the value of engaging in what the participants saw as meaningful work, work that had a direct impact on the well-being and livelihood of others. "I learned one very important lesson: no matter how small a task, or large a project, the hard work you put into it will pay off one day" (Megan, June 23, 2011, journal).

Likewise, another student articulated,

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Today was tough because we worked! We did so much work. There was so much work to be done and we only scratched it, but that scratch can make a GIGANTIC change. . . . We worked hard and hung with the kids. We sweat, bleed, and almost passed out together. We did so much work, but it feels so good because it helps the people of El Tigre have a true home. . . . There's not even enough to say to describe this feeling. . . . Hard work pays off. (Bryce, June 23, 2011, journal)

The students felt that their work was not just valuable, but it was something in which they could come together with the host community and work together to make a difference. As another student elaborated, "Today I felt was very powerful. Helping out a community in that way is pretty awesome. Everyone came together and helped out. I think it's really inspiring, and I like the feeling" (Christian, June 23, 2011, journal).

Having participants engage in meaningful work that had high significance for others created a sense of agency in the participants. The activities provided participants the opportunity to see the value of their contributions and the impact that they were able to have on others.

### ***Learning about the Other***

Another important theme that emerged throughout the data was the way in which participants were making discoveries and developing understanding of their hosts.

There have been many different cultural patterns which I've noticed such as Collectivism and Individualism. The people in El Tigre didn't take credit for all of the hard work which has been put into their town. They recognized that there were others in the community who helped with the effort to improve their town. Another thing I noticed was High contact vs. Low contact behaviors. Back home you wouldn't expect a teacher to be so joyous about getting something. Ms. Jennifer was very joyous when I presented her with a T-shirt. It was shocking because I didn't expect it. But it did make me feel good to know that she accepted it like she did. (Megan, June 22, 2011, journal)

Other moments demonstrated the joy of learning from their hosts, and their enthusiasm to take their new learning home with them.

Our breakfast was amazing, especially the BANANA FRITTERS! The lady that does the cooking said that she'd share the recipe with me! Tomorrow morning I can help her and I can get the recipe off of her. If you ask me, it's SO COOL! I'm so excited. Now I can really take a piece of Costa Rica home with me. (Megan, June 26, 2011, journal)

But in addition to learning about the *other*, participants were able to make connections to themselves and to gain new insights into themselves.

Some things that we have learned so far are that the people value family more than material possessions. In one interview in El Tigre, they said that "when we work together like a community, we are family." I personally found this to be an amazing way of summing up our entire trip so far. We go to school with each other, but that can only bring us so close to each

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other. Actually being in Costa Rica we are growing closer together. We are learning each other's strengths and weaknesses through many things that we do such as learning to salsa dance, paving roads, digging ditch[es], speaking Spanish and much more. As said in an interview with the Costa Rican government official, "for us to forget our own problems and to help others solve their problems generates happiness for everyone." (Tony, June 23, 2011, blog post)

Through this experience, participants had the opportunity to experience seeing life through the eyes of another, and in doing so, it allowed them the chance to consider their own ways of seeing and thinking about the world. While the students were not gone from their home culture long enough to entirely effect a dissonance in their thinking about perspective, the time still allowed participants an entry way into metacognitively thinking about themselves and themselves in relation to others.

### ***Seeing the Bigger Picture***

One of the biggest goals of this work was to encourage students to see and make connections to the bigger picture of their lives and those of the people with whom they engaged in this experience. Students were immersed in living lives outside of the context in which they were familiar, giving them opportunities to examine their own lives from a different perspective. At the same time, using that same new lens to view the lives of the other and make connections that illuminated the connectivity of different peoples while still providing opportunities to compare and contrast in the larger sense. As one student described the experience part way through her time in Costa Rica:

This trip and the meaning [of it] is finally starting to kick in. Back home we have it good. Many people of Costa Rica have so much less than we do. But yet, we as Americans still think we need, need, need. We don't need more things, we need to [do things for] those who need our help. It doesn't matter who they are, or where they live, we're all in this together. We are a family. We live in a world that we care about, and this experience is helping me and the whole group [to] understand these things. . . . I'm starting to see the meaning in this. (Megan, July 1, 2011, blog post)

Likewise, other students reflected after the experience and highlighted the overarching learning and big picture understandings that were developed by participating in this experience.

The trip started off kind of bumpy and boring, but it didn't stay that way at all. I have been able to completely immerse myself in another culture thanks to this trip. I learned that there are a lot of people out there in the world who are less fortunate than me. . . . Although everyone wasn't wealthy they seemed to be very close to each other and welcomed us all with open arms. If I have learned anything from this experience it is that you should appreciate what you have because there are many people in the world who are worse off then (sic) you. I also learned that you should help others whenever you can because people really appreciate that and [it] just feels good to do. Hopefully 5 years from now I will appreciate what I have more and continue to help others. (Rashad, June 30, 2011, journal)

Participants were able to glean some powerful insights into themselves, the other, and the world around them—all fundamental elements in increasing one's intercultural understanding.

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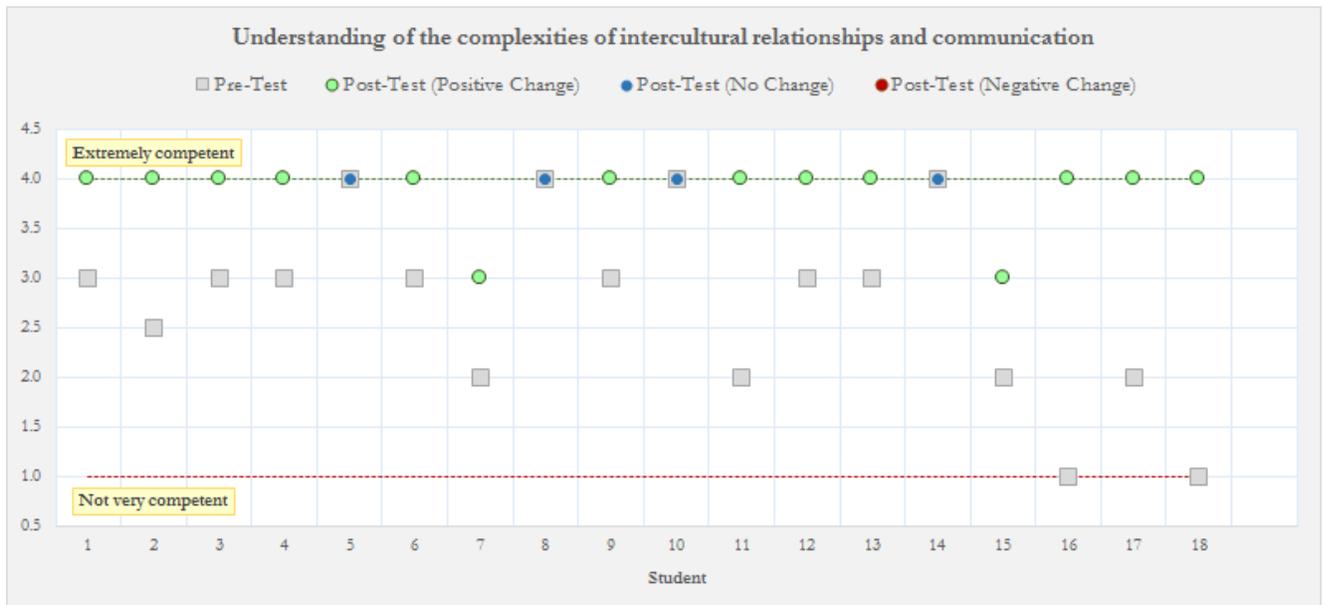
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**By the Numbers**

We uncovered similar trends in the pre- and post-questionnaires the participants completed, as several positive correlations between the learning experience and the participants’ developing sense of intercultural understanding became apparent. As represented by the following three questions, participants came away from the experience feeling more positive and better equipped to understand others.

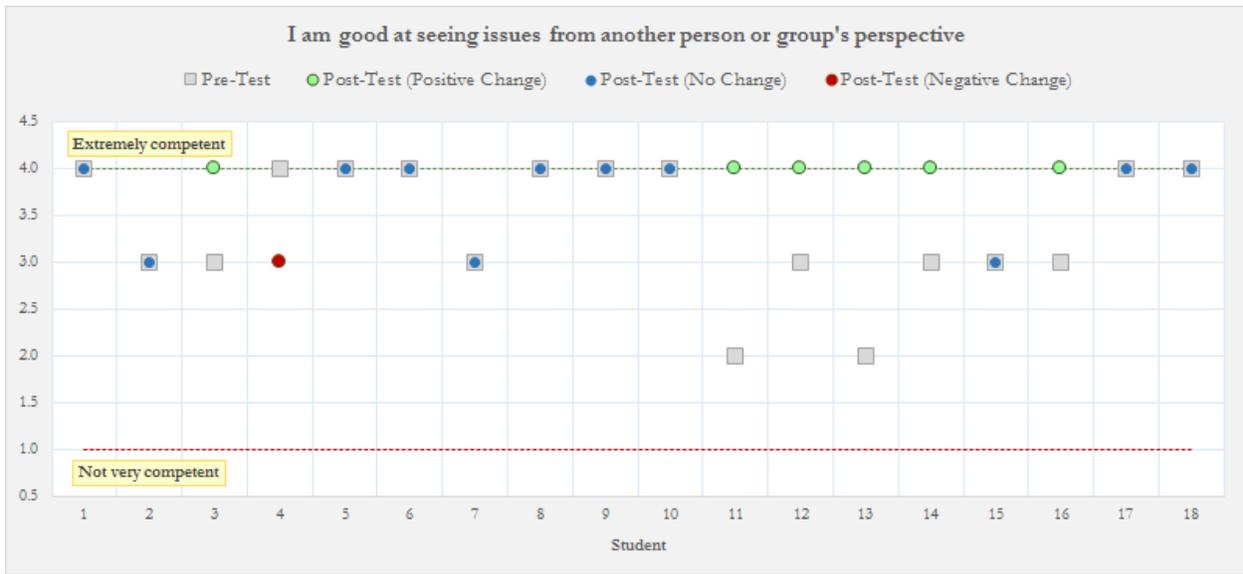
Prior to the trip, participants were asked how competent they felt in terms of understanding the complexities of intercultural relationships and communication. As indicated in Table 1, participants reported a marked increase in this area after partaking in the service-learning experience.

Table 1. *Understanding of the Complexities of Intercultural Relationships and Communication*



Likewise, as indicated in Table 2, participants reported a marked increase in how competent they felt after the trip in terms of being able to see issues from another person or group’s point of view.

Table 2. Ability to See an Issue from Another Person or Group’s Perspective



Additionally, most students self reported being more competent in terms of their abilities to place themselves in the shoes of someone unlike themselves.

Table 3. Ability to Place Oneself in the Shoes of Someone Who Has Had Very Different Life Experiences Than I Have



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The self reporting competency of the participants in this experience highlights the ways in which service-learning helped each participant think about intercultural understanding and consider their own self in becoming a more interculturally competent person.

### Conclusions

It was as though we actually made a connection even with the people we were only with for a few days. We kind of sewed them into our family. How we created a family and we sewed them into it. Like a quilt! There's different sections to a quilt and we just sewed them into it. (Megan, July 1, 2011, interview)

Research has demonstrated that meaningful service can have substantial positive impact on students' academic, civic, and developmental outcomes. (Neal, Leeper, & Root, 2009)

Service-learning provides rich opportunities for participants to enhance their intercultural understanding and competence. It allows occasions for students to see the world through a new lens and it can help bolster students' empathy, tolerance and respect for others. As demonstrated through the service-learning experience here, participants gain rich insights into themselves, deepen understanding of others, and move towards a heightened perception of the importance of intercultural awareness, understanding and competence.

It is not surprising that service-learning is considered one of the six promising approaches schools can use to develop competent and responsible citizens. (Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE, 2003). Experiences, such as the one highlighted in this manuscript, illustrate the power, the promise and the potential of service-learning to promote and help develop meaningful intercultural understanding in participants.

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