

How Does Your Garden Grow?

Cultivating Experiential Learning Across Cultures

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Tags

Citizen Diplomacy/Education Diplomacy; Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Experiential Education; Language Education; Partnerships; Personnel Management; Primary and Secondary Education; Program Design; Program Assessment; Student Learning and Development

Setting

Local people have been farming in the mountainous river valleys of a Southeast Asian country for hundreds of years, enjoying a diverse ecosystem with plenty of rainfall and sunshine. They grow rice, cassava, peppers, and other crops in the valley, and mango, jackfruit, ginger, and coffee in the mountainside jungle. This country also has a long history of colonial occupation and violent conflict that left it with inadequate infrastructure and lingering dependency on foreign aid programs despite abundant natural and human resources.

Two years prior to this case, an Australian provider organized a service-learning program for a group of secondary students (grades 10-12) to visit a pre-secondary school (grades 7-9) in a remote indigenous village in the Southeast Asian country. During their visit, the Australian students established a “permaculture” garden on the local school grounds to supplement food for the local students’ lunchtime meals.

Now, two years after the first program, another group of Australian students is visiting with two parents as chaperones and an Australian staff member from the provider. In this iteration of the program, the provider has organized a series of activities: touring historical sites, distributing school supplies, engaging in English language practice with the local school children, and inspecting the garden created by the previous group.

Case

The trip started well for the visiting students and their hosts. At the historical sites, the visiting students learned how local resistance efforts helped in the struggle for independence, and they were encouraged by community leaders to take pictures to remember. When they arrived at the village, the local school director cheerfully greeted the group, and local students lined up to receive the visiting group and their donations. The Australians see the garden and are surprised that nothing is growing in it. They decide to take photos with the local students. The local English language teacher is upset and complains to the school director in the local language that “these foreigners are here for their photos again.” The teacher tells the director that if the visiting student group wants to learn about gardening, they should ask to see her family’s jungle compound where they have been sustainably cultivating crops for centuries without any help from outsiders.

A few minutes later, during the planned English language practice sessions, the Australian students are trying to make conversation, but they are met with awkward silence. The local pre-secondary students seem limited to responding from memorized scripts. The group is scheduled to stay for a couple more hours, but spirits are low. The teacher is disengaged, and the director feels uncomfortable raising any issues to the Australian group. Both the local and visiting students are beginning to wonder why they are there, and the provider staff member is unsure what to do next. A traditional lunch of bean stew and rice is scheduled, but the Australian students’ parents are uncertain about eating the local food and suggest returning early to the capital.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What cross-cultural issues can you identify in this case? How might the students from both countries be affected by these issues?
- In this case, the local students were younger than the visiting students. What responsibilities do schools and providers have to younger students?
- If you were the provider staff member, what options do you see at this point in the visit? What are the pros and cons of each option?
- If you were the school director, how would you deal with the teacher’s attitude and behaviors, in the moment or afterwards?
- Imagine you are redesigning next year’s trip.
 - Who would you invite onto the redesign team? How could you start with a framework for justice, equality, diversity, inclusion, and belonging in your process?
 - How might the program be structured to be relevant and beneficial to both groups? How can you ensure reciprocity and mitigate power differences?
 - What learning outcomes might you focus on? What activities might support those learning outcomes? How would you assess those learning outcomes?