The Perils and Promises of International Service Learning

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Abstract

This paper examines international service learning (ISL) and international volunteerism (IV), and the benefits and possible negative impacts it can have for students and host communities. If students are unfamiliar with the histories and cultures of the places in which they wish to serve, it is all too easy for them to act and speak in ways that may alienate community partners. Greater problems arise if students do not continuously reflect on their own motivations and biases. Do they feel that they have a duty to “uplift” unfortunate people, or propel them “forward” from their current “backward” or “underdeveloped” state? Do students reflect on the meanings of gender, race, and class in how they perceive others, and how others perceive them? Done without proper training, ISL and IV become modern-day patronizing “civilizing missions.” Students complete their projects without having truly learned about themselves or those they purport to serve, while the subjects of their service may feel used and infantilized. Drawing on my own experience leading Service Learning Kakuma, I offer suggestions on how faculty might better prepare students for ISL/IV.
I begin with quotes from two novels, and a newspaper headline. The first is from Cameroonian author Frederick Oyono’s 1956 work, *The Old Man and the Medal*. Oyono recounts a few days in the life of Meka, who is awarded a medal by the French colonial state for his many years of loyalty. Yet the ceremony and his subsequent night in jail for loitering awaken him to the humiliations and inherent racial hierarchy of colonialism. His pride in having received the medal turns to bitterness. At his home the next day, Meka’s friend Nti commiserates with him: “What have we got in this country? Nothing! Nothing! not even the liberty to refuse their gifts!” (Oyono 1969).

In her magisterial 2013 *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie tells the story of Ifemelu’s life in as a young woman in Nigeria and as a Nigerian woman in America. She experiences the strangeness of being black, but not African-American, of being highly-educated, fluent in English, and ambitious, and yet constantly confronted with typical images of backwards, impoverished, ‘savage’ Africa, needing to be saved. Ifemelu attends a party of well-heeled white Americans, several of whom tell of their charity work in Africa. “Ifemelu wanted, suddenly and desperately, to be from the country of people who gave and not those who received, to be one of those who had and could therefore bask in the grace of having given, to be among those who could afford copious pity and empathy” (Adichie 2013: 209).

Magatte Wade wrote an article for the *Guardian* in 2011 about an exchange she had at the Harvard Business Conference, and about American volunteerism in Africa. I do not know if she chose the title of her article, but it faithfully reveals her argument: “African aid: no more ‘pity shit’” (Wade 2011).

Virginia Tech’s motto is Ut Prosim (that I may serve) and many universities promote service learning. Service learning provides students with experiential learning opportunities, can
help bridge ‘town-gown’ distance, and, not least, improve students’ resumes. At the same time, VT and other universities continue to emphasize the importance of cross-cultural competency for our students, the importance of education that can make students global citizens prepared for an inter-connected world. Thus VT’s 2012-18 strategic plan emphasizes that “Fulfilling our mission in an increasingly complex and interdependent world will also require initiatives that create networks that span geographic scales” (http://www.president.vt.edu/strategic-plan/2012-plan/2012-strategic-plan.pdf, p2). Indeed, “the implications of global interdependence” are highlighted as one of four “structuring challenges that impact the entire university.”

With these two emphases – service and international education – it makes sense that many in academia are attracted to the idea of international volunteerism (IV) and international service learning (ISL). Thus VT’s office of Outreach and International Affairs is charged with, among many other things, “arranging opportunities for students to serve community organizations and communities while learning” (http://www.vt.edu/about/administration/vp-outreach.html). At VT, there are numerous student groups dedicated to service abroad, such as Students Helping Honduras and Bridges to Prosperity (with a focus on Haiti). Faculty also lead international service learning expeditions. Through the Pamplin College of Business, for example, students can enroll in “Service Learning in Cusco, Peru,” or “Creating Social Change” in which students spend five weeks in Rwanda, Kenya, or Ethiopia.

Students (and faculty) undoubtedly find these projects immensely rewarding, and report that they have been transformed by serving others abroad (Bringle, Hatcher and Jones, 2011). Yet we must be very careful not to allow this enthusiasm to cloud our thinking about ISL/IV. Such projects carry the potential for great rewards, and great risks – this is as true for international as domestic service, as Eby (1998) pointed out some time ago. Students risk
becoming part of the “white/westerner savior industrial complex” (Zakaria, 2014). We must ask two very tough sets of questions, and we must be brutally honest in our answers.

1. Have students actually learned anything about themselves and those they encounter? Are they learning in any depth about the places they visit? (This is particularly a concern when they go to non-English speaking countries.) Are they questioning their own worldviews – and not in the trite sense of ‘valuing what I have’ or ‘although they were poor they were happy and generous, so I should not be so materialistic’. Rather, do they question the way the world works, the nature of international economics, of the neo-liberal processes and neo-colonialism that contribute to the poverty students might seek to alleviate? Do they regale family and friends with stories of strange food and ‘roughing it’ in local housing, or do they confront loved ones with the injustices that the students (should have) witnessed?

2. Are students doing more harm than good? In the name of helping others, have they reinforced existing political and social hierarchies? Are they humble and willing to listen and learn? Or do they arrive with the “pity shit,” with the gift that the recipient cannot refuse? Have they emphasized the distance between themselves, the privileged youth of the US, and the others, those in need of “help”? Are students (and faculty) prepared to admit that the trip may have had absolutely no benefit to those who were to be served?

These are not easy questions to answer. Indeed, they are rarely easy questions to pose. One might shy from interrogating an enthusiastic, well-meaning college student who is deeply motivated to serve others. One might hesitate before calling on a fellow faculty member to
justify a project that has swallowed up many hours and many dollars. Yet we must be honest and constantly force ourselves to ask these questions. We owe it to our students, and ourselves, and the communities we purport to serve. Instructors often experiment with new pedagogical tools in the classroom. If one fails, it is a lesson learned, and faculty and students might be disappointed. But there is little long-term damage done. Yet poorly-planned ISL/IV can have long-term negative consequences. Students accrue cultural capital from serving (what they portray as) a needy, poor, brown or black people, reinforcing the racism and paternalism so common in American attitudes toward the “third world.” The civilizing mission is rejuvenated, the “white man’s burden” is “Liked” on thousands of Facebook pages. Those who they claim to have served may have received some minor, transitory material benefit, but they remain largely as they were before – except that now, like Ifemeul, they may wish they could be givers rather than receivers of charity and pity.

More scholars have begun to question ISL and IV, but too often these critiques are lost amid the celebrations of the projects. It is my impression, at least at VT, that ISL and IV programs can be put together with little oversight or vetting. Fellow faculty are perhaps unwilling to deeply interrogate their colleague’s outreach projects, while the university can point to such projects as evidence of innovative unions of global experiences and experiential learning.

In my own experience organizing and leading an international service learning program, I have struggled with how to ensure that, at the very least, no harm is done and, in the best case, both my students and those we hope to serve emerge better for the experience. I have twice taken students to volunteer in the Kakuma refugee camp in northwest Kenya through a program called Service Learning Kakuma, or SLK. In May-June, 2012, two VT undergraduates worked with Lutheran World Federation, which oversees much of the social services in the camp.
their four weeks, one taught in a primary school, the other worked with the gender and sport divisions of LWF. In 2013, two students spent one month with a Jesuit Refugee Services project called Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins (JC:HEM). JC:HEM provides online college education to refugees (and members of host communities) in Kakuma as well as in Malawi and Jordan. The SLK students served as tutors, gave presentations on paper-writing and Microsoft office programs, and interceded with international faculty for students. Two other students were prepared to go to Kakuma in 2014, but the trip had to be cancelled at the last minute due to security concerns.

I cannot claim to have created the perfect ISL experience – indeed, as in all good service learning projects, I constantly reflect on SLK, asking how it could be made better, what impact it actually has on VT and JC:HEM students, and if it is, in fact, a worthwhile project at all. I do feel, however, that my experiences in forming and reforming SLK can suggest some ways that other faculty might conceive of their own ISL projects. There are four points that are critical, I argue, to constructing an effective, robust, and, at the very least, non-harmful ISL project.

1. Selecting the project. Is it a project that the community desires, and has prioritized? Or is it one that speaks more to us and our students, something we see as valuable, and that the partners “should” desire? (And we must be sure not to fetishize the “community” in “community partner,” but keep in mind that “communities” are made up of individuals with different ideas of the common good, of what is valuable, of how or even if a project should be carried out.) Do partners have a voice in how the project will be run, or if it should be undertaken at all? Are there defined parameters for the project? Is it a project for which our students can contribute essential skills, or could local people carry it out on their own? (A story I’ve been told: in 2010 a group of Americans on a mission trip to
Cambodia take up shovels to dig an irrigation trench as part of their service. A local man watches for some time, then walks off. He returns driving his tractor and completes the job for the sweating visitors.)

2. **Selecting students.** Are any and all students accepted into the project, or are they screened to ensure that they have skills appropriate for the project, that they have the character and maturity to fulfill what is expected of them?

3. **Preparing students.** Are students prepared, emotionally and intellectually, for the project? Have they been made to grapple with the ways in which they have internalized images of the non-American “other”, and notions of modernity and backwardness? Or are they stepping into another country bearing the self-imposed burden of “developing” or “civilizing” impoverished, down-trodden brown and black people? Are they aware of the power differential between themselves and those they are to serve? Do they have a sense of the complexity of the issue at hand, or do they see it as a simple technical problem that can be resolved in a matter of weeks? Have they studied the history and culture of those they propose to serve? Have they been coached against paternalism as well as condescending tropes of “they are poor but happy”?

4. **Post-ISL research.** What do students do with their ISL experience? Does it become just another line on a resume, or does it serve as an opportunity to enrich their overall academic experience?

For the rest of the paper, I want to discuss how I have attempted to address each of these four points in SLK.

*Selecting the project*
I first identified Kakuma as a possible site for ISL based on VT’s ongoing relationship with resettled refugees in Roanoke. For a decade, our students have volunteered to serve as tutors to school kids, assist adults with their English language skills, and help others prepare for the US citizenship exam. I have offered a service learning option in a number of my African history classes for students who wished to work with resettled refugees from the continent, and I act as faculty advisor for the student-led Coalition for Refugee Resettlement. Many of the families were Somali Bantu and had lived – sometimes for five or more years – in Kakuma. Given my own research interests in Kenya, it appeared that an ISL project in Kakuma could draw on my own background and my students’ local outreach efforts. Thus in 2011, while in Kenya on a research trip, I contacted the Lutheran World Federation, and visited Kakuma to speak with their head of operations in the camp. LWF agreed to host two students the next year, and we outlined duties they might undertake. Due to a variety of issues – including poor communication and a turnover in staff – my students and I arrived to find no planning had been done in how to make use of them. One student was dispatched to teach in a grade school, and the other was attached to the gender and sport sections of LWF.

I was not at all convinced that my students had had their skills put to their full use, although in later conversations teachers and LWF staff in Kakuma praised their work. While in Kakuma with my students in 2012, I made contact with JRS/JC:HEM, and explored with them the possibility of hosting VT students the next year. I toured their facilities, and we discussed the ways my students could assist – as tutors, for example. Over the course of the subsequent year, I remained in regular email contact with JC:HEM staff in Kakuma and with the individual who oversees JC:HEM projects around the world. It was clear that my students would in fact have particular skills and experiences that would be valuable in Kakuma. JC:HEM courses are
eight weeks and are taught by faculty from around the world, although most are American. Readings are similar to those used in US universities, while all assignments are written – a combination of papers and posts on discussion boards. Often, faculty have a limited picture of their students’ daily lives and backgrounds. Students are often unable to come to the JC:HEM campus (a set of buildings that include two computer labs) due to illness, the need to collect food rations, meetings with NGO staff, family emergencies, or rains that turn dry river beds into impassible rivers. Students are often unfamiliar with what American faculty expect of them, and the reading material is not geared to a Congolese or Somali living in Kenya. While JC:HEM is highly selective program, students often struggle for a whole host of reasons: English is normally their third or fourth language, their educations have been disrupted by domestic crisis and flight, they have limited experience in writing essays on computers, and so on.

When my two students worked with JC:HEM in 2013, they were able to provide assistance in a number of ways. First, they were available to any JC:HEM student who desired their input. JC:HEM students were never required to seek them out, nor was there any requirement that they follow my students’ advice. Instead, my students were on site during all working hours, Monday through Saturday, for consultation. As time passed, JC:HEM students were increasingly willing to take advantage of them for help understanding readings and writing papers. My students also gave presentations on, for example, how to craft a five paragraph essay, and how to use Powerpoint. They also served when necessary as go-betweens for students and faculty. What my students had to offer was, in a sense, themselves: how to be a college student.

*Selecting students*
Because of the nature of the project, I limit SLK to two students per trip. First, students are required to live in the NGO section of Kakuma where housing is often in short supply. Second, so long as SLK works with JC:HEM, it seems unlikely that more students could be useful: two seemed to have been able to fulfill their needs at this point. In the future, I may seek ways to expand, but at this point it must remain a small program. Given the small number of students I can take, and given the nature of the project – working in a refugee camp located far from any urban areas, in a region with a truly unpleasant climate – it is critical that I be selective in who takes part in SLK. In fact, I believe, it is critical that any ISL/IV should be selective.

For the first cohort of SLK, I personally selected students – I had had them both in several classes, knew them to be bright, hard working, mature, and seasoned international travelers. For the next two years, I began with informational meetings. I gave an overview of SLK, with logistical details, the nature of the project, and so on, and former SLK students offered their own perspectives. We emphasized that Kakuma is not a resort. It is hot and dry, rooms are not air conditioned, living conditions are fairly basic, and insects abound. Perhaps we make it sound worse than it really is, but I see this meeting as a chance to weed out those who are not, for whatever reason, entirely committed.

Students must either attend an informational meeting or come talk with me personally before they submit an application. This consists of a personal statement, two letters of reference (at least one from a faculty member), and transcripts. The application process is intended to ensure that the students selected have the academic skills necessary to assist JC:HEM students, a clear sense of purpose, and the emotional maturity required to live in Kakuma.
Prior to their trip to Kakuma, SLK students are required to take a one semester, three credit independent study with me. This is one of the most time-consuming, but most important, parts of SLK. In part, our weekly meetings provide an opportunity for us to discuss logistical issues: ensuring that they have proper prophylaxis for malaria, helping them to seek out funding sources, and so on. They are also required to undertake service with VT’s Coalition for Refugee Resettlement. The purpose of this is two-fold. First, it begins to acquaint them with some of the issues surrounding being a refugee. While students with CRR are discouraged from asking about clients’ histories – which might bring up painful memories – they nonetheless are exposed to some of the daily struggles of those very few refugees who manage to be resettled in the US. Second, it ensures that SLK students do not focus only on international needs, but recognize that there are individuals fighting to get by and get ahead in our own community. Too often, it seems, students are more invigorated to help the foreign “other” than to deal with what seem to be much more complex and perhaps less ‘sexy’ issues nearer to home. (Although I fear that working with “refugees” even in southwest Virginia might carry some unwarranted cache.)

The major part of the independent study consists of weekly readings and one to two page reaction papers. The readings fall into four broad groups.

The first set of readings comes from Curtis Keim’s *Mistaking Africa*. This book is very readable, but for many students very unsettling. Keim explores the image of Africa common in the United States, from the nineteenth century through today. For those of us who have been engaged in African studies for some years, there is not too much surprising here. In films, television, print media, advertising, and general everyday discourse, the portrayal of Africa is simplified, exoticized, extreme (either the backward, diseased, violent savage, or the noble savage living in non-materialistic harmony with nature and one another), and so on. For students
with little knowledge of Africa, Keim’s discussion and critique of these stereotypes is revealing. They begin to see images of Africa all around them, and question them. They reflect on their own ideas about Africa, and question them. I do not expect them to immediately shed twenty years of wrong-headed lessons about the Dark Continent, but I do expect them to be aware of the biases, prejudices, and ignorance they have imbibed, and to work to eliminate them.

Keim includes a chapter entitled “We Should Help Them,” which leads into the second set of readings, on critiques of ISL/IV. Why, I ask them, do they really want to take part in SLK – in service work in *Africa* – and what are the implications for residents of Kakuma? Facile answers of “wanting to help” are unacceptable, for they conceal a whole set of other issues and assumptions: about Africa, about the need to help the less fortunate, about the “civilizing mission.” It also evades the other half of the equation: how do those being “helped” factor in, other than as recipients? Facile answers of “working in partnership with recipients” are equally unacceptable, insofar as they do not recognize that such relationships simply cannot be *equal* partnerships. American students arrive with the benefits of money, education, the protection of the US government and military (in the case of conflict in the area), medicines, whiteness (usually), and simply the ability to leave Kakuma.

I ask: what do we make of Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina’s “The Power of Love,” in which he describes how he met a lovely young woman from England, all of 19, who came all the way to Naivasha, to a specific location very near a lovely lake, next to several beautiful game sanctuaries and a lodge run by her boyfriend’s father. But these were not her concern. She was in Kenya to teach the people of some peri-urban location how to use a condom. She told me that she talks to groups of men and shows
them how a condom can save their lives. I asked her whether there were no
nurses or teachers who could do this at maybe a tenth or one hundred-thousandth
of the cost it would take to keep her in this lovely and rather expensive location,
and her eyes melted and she said, “But I care about people. Can’t you see people
are dying? Something must be done.” (Wainaina 2008: 89; see also Krotz 2008)

It is easy for my students to scoff at the English do-gooder, but with some prodding they see that
she might not be all that different from Americans seeking “to do good.” What can my students
do, I ask them, to avoid the well-aimed mocking of Wainaina? As one SLK student later told
me, such readings made her “very conscious of my role as a Muzungu [white person] when we
were there.”

I also tell my students that, in the end, their direct impact on the lives of JC:HEM
students will be limited; SLK is ultimately more about my students than those they tutor. There
may be better grades for JC:HEM students, more well-polished presentations. But at the end of
the day, the JC:HEM students remain refugees “warehoused” by the international community.
Even upon completing the JC:HEM program, students are not guaranteed employment within the
camp or a ticket out of it. Fox (2002: 7) argues that “There can be no doubt that service learning
is not a practice that can achieve any substantial, long-term, structural contributions to
community transformation in accordance with insiders’ values.” There are massive political and
economic forces at play that have produced multiple refugee crises in eastern Africa, and that
keep refugees in Kakuma. As Mathers points out in her critique of Nicholas Kristof’s vision of
social change in Africa, the focus on the individual in need of help, and the individual providing
help, obscures the larger context that created poverty, warfare, and so on (Mathers 2012). At
best, SLK helps a few JC:HEM students do somewhat better in their courses. This is of value to JC:HEM students, but it cannot be as transformative to them as it is to my students.

We also read Ivan Illich’s classic, “To Hell with Good Intentions.” In this 1968 address, Illich condemned the gathering of American youth who were preparing to volunteer in Mexico. What could they possibly offer, he asked?

I do have deep faith in the enormous good will of the U.S. volunteer. However, his good faith can usually be explained only by an abysmal lack of intuitive delicacy. By definition, you cannot help being ultimately vacationing salesmen for the middle-class “American Way of Life,” since that is really the only life you know. A group like this could not have developed unless a mood in the United States had supported it - the belief that any true American must share God’s blessings with his poorer fellow men. The idea that every American has something to give, and at all times may, can and should give it, explains why it occurred to students that they could help Mexican peasants “develop” by spending a few months in their villages. (Illich 1968)

Illich here anticipates the critique of Kristof. The volunteers, the missionaries, the development workers, the “do-gooders” from the West all seek to fix problems caused largely by – the West. Political assassinations of leftist leaders and the propping up of friendly dictatorial regimes; economic policies that meant third world nations produced only raw materials to be processed in the West and sold back at higher prices; sales of small and heavy arms that helped keep civil wars and insurrections lasting for years; World Bank and IMF policies that gutted health and education systems in the borrowing nations: these are the problems that well-meaning westerners wish to “fix,” not by changing policies in Washington or New York or Geneva, but in
some Third World “village.” Illich also anticipates recent work (and echoes Du Bois [1920]) on whiteness: the presumption that white people, white Americans, represent the norm to which others strive, that their intentions are not complicated by politics, race, or culture, that through charity, or education, or the Peace Corps, they can alleviate the suffering of (poor, brown or black) people.

My students are, at this point, thoroughly confused. More than one SLK student asked if it was my intention to convince them not to take part in SLK. I wonder if that is not incorrect. At the very least, I want my students to be unsettled with the very notion of ISL/IV. I ask them to be brutally honest, if not with me then at least with themselves, about their motivations. I ask them to think deeply about the power dynamics implicit in such projects, about what it might feel like to be on the receiving side of gift-giving, pity, charity, or service. I ask them to think about how SLK is, or is not, different from the “pity shit” Wade deplores. I ask them to consider if, perhaps, it might not be better to say “to hell with good intentions” and dismantle SLK. It is not an unrealistic possibility, and it is a question I hope that they continue to ask throughout their time in Kakuma.

From here, students delve into the histories of the regions from which refugees in Kakuma come. The majority, at this point, come from South Sudan and Somalia, with thousands more from Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. (Many young people, however, were born in Kakuma and know no other home, although they are classified by the Kenya government and the UN as nationals of their parents’ homeland.) Of course, it is impossible in one semester to comprehend in any but the most shallow way the long and complex histories of these disparate lands. Students will have a basic understanding, however, of the histories and cultures, and the crises that drove JC:HEM students from their homes.
Finally, we read works from ‘refugee studies.’ Students learn about the history of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as well as very strong critiques about how the “refugee regime” operates today. Some of these works are quite general, others specific to East Africa, and some are focused on Kakuma in particular. The UNHCR and other NGOs which work with refugees tend to enjoy a sterling reputation, at least among those who have little experience with them. A host of works – by scholars, practitioners, and current and former refugees – suggests that these organizations are not apolitical bodies selflessly dedicated to the bettering of others. Paternalism, lack of transparency and accountability, violence, withholding food as punishment, and more have been documented among agencies working in refugee camps. SLK students must try to empathize with the refugees with whom they will be working, and seeing NGOs from the refugee perspective is a critical aspect of this. Works by refugees, such as the semi-fictional autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, and the refugee-run online newspaper in Kakuma, KANERE.org, are important pieces to this.

Of course, American students at VT will never truly be understand (we hope) what it is to be a refugee. Again, Illich:

there is also a gulf between what you feel and what the Mexican people feel ...
This gulf is so great that in a Mexican village you, as White Americans (or cultural white Americans) can imagine yourselves exactly the way a white preacher saw himself when he offered his life preaching to the black slaves on a plantation in Alabama. The fact that you live in huts and eat tortillas for a few weeks renders your well-intentioned group only a bit more picturesque (Illich 1968).
At best, then, SLK students must have at least a basic conception of what JC:HEM students have gone through prior to reaching Kakuma, and the tribulations they continue to endure in what has been called a voluntary prison. SLK students constantly fight to sensitize themselves to the worldviews of those with whom they will work.

Post ISL research

We expect service learning to be transformative for the student, that when they exit the community center or board the plane home, they have become more empathetic, more considerate, more cosmopolitan, more committed to social change. On the ‘learning’ side, we also expect our students to better understand the area in which they served – be it education, health care, community organizing, or organic farming. When the project is done, however, students may simply walk away, the class complete, and the experience might in fact have little lasting influence on them personally or academically. This was a particular concern for me, in that the classroom work took place prior to their time in Kakuma. How would I ensure that students had a chance to reflect on and put to use their experiences?

I thus require students to undertake a research project in the fall semester after their time in Kakuma. The first cohort did this through an independent study with me, while the second cohort enrolled in a class in the English Department, “There and Back Again: Applying Study Abroad to Undergraduate Research” with Jane Wemhoener. Students select a topic that emerged as an area of interest (or concern) during their time in Kakuma. They undertake the regular library-based research, but it is always informed by their experiences in Kakuma. (They do not undertake actual research in Kakuma – which would carry with it numerous ethical and bureaucratic difficulties – but in their normal daily activities they learn many things about
refugee issues.) Thus far, they have written on female genital mutilation/surgery in Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps; impediments to free access to education in Kakuma; the militarization of refugee camps; and the process of refugee resettlement in the US. In the latter two cases, students presented their research at several forums on campus.

**Final thoughts**

I want to reiterate here that SLK is not perfect, and that I am not asserting my project’s superiority over those that are not as robust. Indeed, I anticipate critiques of SLK – I welcome them, with some trepidation perhaps, but I welcome them nonetheless. We ask our service learners to engage in constant self-reflection, and it would be hypocritical if we did not do the same. I also hope I have the courage to cancel SLK entirely and forever, if I find that it does not do what I and JC:HEM wish it to do. If VT students bring only pity shit and gifts that cannot be refused, then psychological harm and anger among residents of Kakuma will be the result – and no amount of learning and growth and resume-padding for my students would be enough to make the project worthwhile.

This kind of self-criticism should be the norm among ISL/IV leaders and participants. It seems to me that faculty have the duty to think through the implications of our projects, to plan extensively, to prepare and over-prepare students psychologically and intellectually. If we, as faculty, ignore the ways in which our projects trade on stereotypes of “traditional” people, of the “noble savage,” of the intrepid, adventurous American travelling to darkest Africa, then we deserve to be criticized. If we fail to take the time to learn about the cultures and histories of the places we visit, and if our students know even less, then we deserve to be criticized. If we feel that our good intentions outweigh possible negative impacts, then we deserve to be criticized.
Our duty, as academics, is to encourage our students to see themselves and the world in new ways. Spending a week feeding orphans or building a home does not necessarily alter students’ world views. How do they grow if they are not made to confront the power relations of such projects? if they are not forced to think about how they are the inheritors of the West’s long history of dominating, and infantilizing, and assuming the burden of “developing,” the non-West? if they glory in the praise of friends and family for having “roughed it” (by living in Africans’ homes, by using their host family’s pit latrine), and leverage this cultural capital into internships and employment? if they are more at peace after their experience rather than less?

Faculty and students involved in ISL/IV must, I argue, must take greater responsibility for our projects. We should not be forgiven for condescending to and exocitizing other human beings, our sins wiped away with “he meant well.” That is simply not good enough.
References


