

Being With

Joy Liu

Duke University

Every year in the few weeks before summer vacation, the question that fills the space between the mad dash of term papers and final exams is “What are you doing this summer?” The standard responses range from “I’ll be in New York doing investment banking” to “I’m spending my summer in DC as an intern on Capitol Hill” or “I’ll be in Vietnam building schools”. When I was asked this question, I also had my stock answer. Last summer it was “I’ll be in Kenya researching childhood immunizations”. This summer it’s “I’ll be in India working on neonatal mortality”. Sometimes I embellish it with more details about the Non-Governmental Organization that I was working with or the amount of interviewing that I will have to do. Other times, I don’t. Either way, most of the time, my response produces a reaction of vague admiration followed by some enthusiastic words about what a great time I will have or how selfless I am. Often this will be complemented with a casual, off-handed, “it’s so great that you’re out to save the world”. On these occasions, I try to work up the courage to say what I really feel, that I don’t have the capacity to save anyone. More than anything else, I am going there to learn. Somehow, that answer sounds lazy compared to the prestigious internships or research projects that are described by my peers. As a result, I usually nod and mumble something along the lines of “Not really” before turning the topic to what they will be doing without much additional thought about the nature of the conversation that just transpired.

On closer examination, how I have answered this question in the past and how many service-learning students today answer this question is a reflection of our performance-based culture, which doesn’t necessarily complement the objectives of service-learning. Service-learning and community-based research are currently framed and advertised to students under a heavily performance-based attitude. Although it attracts some of the best and brightest students, it often produces a simplistic view of service that ultimately doesn’t have the community at heart. Part of it comes from trying to apply an old framework to a new way of teaching when the values don’t necessarily align. This can be seen in how students define success and failure in a service-learning project. Before we apply for grants or select the program that we are interested in, the first steps are background research and answering proposal questions. What tangible product will you give to the community? How will you go about doing this? These questions are intended to make students think about their surroundings and actions, but it also subconsciously defines success and failure in our minds. In preparation, the students in my class and I were told to expect the unexpected and that carrying out the project proposal was sometimes not possible. Although everyone would nod, but how many of us actually comprehended the implications of not achieving what was outlined before us in black and white? Success and failure should not be defined solely by the enactment of a project. To do so shifts the heart of engagement from the community partner to the student’s own conception of a project and diminishes the potential of learning to be part of a community.

Another question raised is who we are training to be the future of service-learning. Most of my peers are eager overachievers who have never (or very rarely) tackled anything that they couldn’t solve by relying on the combination of diligence and ambition that our colleges rewarded us for with admission. Especially when our funding is attached to producing concrete

results and our resumes can be bolstered by the products, we rely on the mentality that's guided us so far because it's what we know. We plan more, work harder, and force our way to achieving the goal that has been determined before we even set foot in the community in which we'll be working. We go in with the intention of carrying out a project, of doing "good" for the community. We believe that it's enough, and we are never told otherwise when we're rewarded based on fulfillment of the expectations outlined. Service-learning becomes another opportunity to perfect the ability to jump through various hoops that our schools or teachers present instead of an alternate way of thinking about our education or a broader worldview.

That was my mentality last year when I was selected to participate in a summer service-learning program run by my university. My parents were nervous at first, but eventually allowed me spend eight weeks in Muhuru Bay, a rural Kenyan district on the shores of Lake Victoria. I was a guest of a local NGO that was the first all-girls secondary school in the area. Its mission of educating and empowering girls resonated with me. I was eager to spend time with the girls as a mentor of sorts, someone with whom they could exchange ideas. Additionally, I would be doing community-based research on childhood immunizations with two other students in collaboration with the local health center. Our research sought to examine the barriers to childhood immunization and possible ways to overcome those obstacles. We developed a questionnaire and worked with translators to administer it to over fifty mothers across the district. The more mothers we interviewed, the more I realized how deceptively simple the problems initially seemed to be. One commonly cited barrier was that a mother didn't have transportation to go to the clinic for immunizations. It seems like a straight-forward problem at face value, but the root touched deeper currents of gender roles, economics, and education in the community. A woman couldn't go to the clinic unless her husband gave her money, and the husband almost never attended prenatal sessions with her. Therefore, he usually didn't place much importance on immunizations. These entrenched gender dynamics often prevented mothers, who had their children's best interest at heart, from accessing life-saving immunizations that modern medicine has made available. A woman's economic dependence on the men in her family also, reduces her ability to make decisions. In addition, many women dropped out of school at an early age, often due to a lack of money or pressure to get married since girls' education isn't highly valued in the community. Consequently, many mothers didn't receive health education in school. This lack of knowledge further perpetuated the disempowerment and economic dependence of women, resulting in a viscous cycle. The interconnectedness and structural nature of the issues defied categorization and simple recommendations by three largely untrained, foreign student researchers.

It was at this point when I truly began examining what I was doing. Our original plan had been to conduct a research study with the possibility of implementing an intervention based on the data. As time progressed, the latter portion of the plan was becoming increasingly unlikely due to several factors. Most prominent among them was the possibility that our data wouldn't yield anything substantial and the question of what would happen after we left in a matter of weeks. With the prospect of a beneficial result disappearing before my eyes, the value of my work was called into question, as well as the issue of whether I should really be there at all. In addition to my private doubts, I was directly confronted every time by the mothers that we interviewed, asking, "What will your research do for us?" Each time I let one of my peers answer. When forced, I usually stuttered that we wanted to gather information to better inform the clinic and the community, so they can be empowered to act on their own. It seemed more like an excuse than an answer. Perhaps the most reasonable answer that I heard from a fellow student

researcher was that without the research, nothing could possibly change at all. This was the perspective I adopted in an attempt to reconcile my actions with my nagging doubts, but something about the “if” part of the statement never ceased to bother me. The community deserved a better answer than a hypothetical, and the fact that I couldn’t give it called for a reexamination of my actions. Who actually stands to benefit from my activities in the community? I had a sneaking suspicion that under my current framework, I was taking more than I was receiving. It was exploitation, to a degree, and it made me little better than the other foreigners who came for resources, money, and power. The only difference might be my conscience, which shrank a little more every time I walked out of an interview with a teenage mother who already had four or five children demanding her attention and more on the way. After taking her time and asking her to recount an often troubled past, how could I look her in the eye and tell her that I couldn’t really do anything for her?

So I stopped thinking about it. I trudged through the drudgery of interviewing like a routine. It became another task, another thing I had to do. I couldn’t question the situation because we had a task to finish, a proposal to achieve. I had made a commitment to my group, and I couldn’t do anything to jeopardize that. I kept on hoping that things would turn out better than I expected. I told myself that I was overreacting, just as my peers told me. At some point, we all questioned our impact and what good, if any, we were doing there, but I didn’t want to think so much that I became paralyzed out of doubt and fear. I was afraid that I would emerge more confused, doubtful, and even disillusioned than before. Was that a desired outcome of service learning and community-based research? The uplifting anecdotes and motivational posters that always seem to accompany advertisements to these programs seem to denote otherwise. I wasn’t sure what I would discover about myself if I thought too much, so at some point I stopped. I focused on my work, co-authoring a 36-page report summarizing our data, findings, and recommendations. Our group presented key points to the clinic staff as well as a group of community health workers. At the end of the meeting, one elderly community health worker stood up to tell us how much he appreciated our effort to share the information with the community. He explained that many others have done research and the community has seen little of the data and even less in concrete results. As consoling as that was, it was disheartening to return a year later to not even find our report in the clinic and definitely not readily accessible to the public—which was our original intention. Although I realize that much of the aftermath was outside my control and needed to be undertaken by the clinic, it highlighted my failure to question during the process. As evident from the community health worker’s comment, I wasn’t the only person to fall short on this account. Those before me, some with much more knowledge and experience, had also neglected this point. The fact that it wasn’t just a personal failing, that I was one of many, signaled a fundamental shortcoming with how service-learning is presented. As long as these experiences are framed and sold to students in a way that emphasizes *for* more than *with*, the results can never truly be useful or honest to either side.

I don’t mean to undermine the benefits of service-learning and community-based research. I currently do grassroots fundraising and advocacy work for FACE AIDS, a youth-driven organization that emerged from a summer service-learning experience of several college students. In Kenya, I partnered with a community-based organization that has always been a testament to the power of student engagement of what can happen when students do not think that they are too young, too unknowledgeable or too powerless to do something valuable for the community. I, too, am a child of civic engagement. I know the value of educating and training

the next generation to be socially conscious, to find something fulfilling beyond the race to success.

However, I do think that it's necessary to critically examine the ethics behind student research projects, such as the one my peers and I undertook, and to acknowledge their limits. It's essential to recognize the lack of formal disciplinary training that many students, especially undergraduates, have and to set expectations accordingly. Otherwise, the underlying value of service-learning falls prey to the performance-based culture and results in something that might be no better than the egotistical approach to "help" that service-learning and community-based research try to avoid. Applying this awareness to my own research experience, I realize that there was very little I was actually qualified to do without additional training or supervision. As much as I would have liked to see a concrete intervention at the time, in retrospect I would now view any program that might have been implemented as a result of my community-based research to be presumptuous and reckless. Unfortunately, when my funding is determined by the scope of my work and the potential for the project to evolve into an implementable intervention, there is no room to consider the limitations or think through the complexities. The goal is to find a way, any way, to make it all happen.

Despite all my doubts and the voices in my mind telling me that this chapter of life has already closed, I couldn't stop thinking about Kenya. I had only started to understand the community, and the two words that kept on nagging me were "what if". What if I had more time? What could I learn? Ultimately, what I wanted to do was listen. I wanted listening and learning to be my project, so I went back the following summer with funding to collect stories from the community. In this interaction, I found much more meaning and reciprocity. Although I'm entrusted with the daunting task of representing these life stories with all the love, heartache, and emotions that they were told with, I do it with the knowledge that I'm just the messenger here to convey a message others should know. With nearly everyone that I spoke to, I asked one particular question, "What do you think Muhuru Bay needs the most?" The responses I got ranged from a youth empowerment center to an injection of more capital. All of the responses were intriguing. In thinking about an answer that best encapsulates all the answers I received, I realized that what Muhuru Bay needs the most are people who care about it. It needs people who have its best interests at heart, who care more than just to do research for two months and fulfill their own goals. This time, whatever doubts I may have about the final product, at least I know that it was done with a core of listening, learning, relationships, and the community.

In a few weeks I'll be back at school, undoubtedly to have more than a few conversations where I'll be asked that simple but loaded question, "What did you do this summer?" If I don't pause, I'll respond that I returned to Kenya to collect stories. But if I do pause, if I really stop and think about the most important thing that I did, I'll respond by saying, "I was being with." When I wasn't busy interviewing, I was engaged in a conversation about religion over a cup of steaming hot tea; I was reading a book with a seventh-grader in an empty classroom; I was drawing a picture of the scene before me with a dozen amazed children huddled over my back. I was listening, I was sharing. I believe that my most significant service wasn't in any report I produced, but rather in my effort to be a part of the community, even if only for two months. The most important aspect of my time there was in my state of being with.

By realizing its importance, I better achieve reciprocity. I know that I gave as much as I took. I gave in knowledge, in thought, and in ideas. I gave in school fees and materials when appropriate. I gave in words and laughter, silence and tears. I gave with my heart because my open, slightly naïve face couldn't possibly hide all the emotions that I felt. Most importantly, I

gave with my all. The relationships I formed were among the most exhausting ones I've ever had because they were fundamentally unequal on a socioeconomic level. I wanted to be a peer and a friend, but that relationship is complicated because my status as a foreigner always comes with the messy questions that relative wealth brings in. It was emotionally exhausting, but through it all, I remained open to forming new relationships. I was willing to take the risks. For one of the first times in my life, I was emotionally available. What resulted was an emotional roller coaster—one that I wasn't ready for, but one that I needed to ride. My final destination is the state of having been completely immersed in a community, emerging with a love that will serve as an unwavering motivation.

So the next time someone asks me what I spent my summer doing, I will say, "I was being with. What were you doing?" I'll wait as confusion instead of admiration cross their face, and then I'll smile, because I know that I've given the complete answer.