In this paper, the authors reflect upon the challenges they faced in an international service-learning course offered to U.S. undergraduate students about the complexities of the U.S. relationship with Mexico. The goal was to provide students with a critically-informed service experience involving a fully collaborative social exchange among their student group, Mexican immigrants, and the home communities in Mexico. Despite its departure from the model service-learning experience, the authors conclude that the project was nonetheless meaningful and worthwhile. They liken this kind of work to the process of creating humus: a messy, undefined organic process, full of questions, mistakes, uncertainties and a lack of control for outcomes, yet essential for the fertility of the soil and for plant growth.

Key words: International service-learning, critical service-learning, Mexican immigration

In a darkened room of a local restaurant in a rural, indigenous community in Veracruz, Mexico, an unusual film showing occurred to an unlikely gathering of people. Community members with family who had emigrated to work in rural dairy farms in Wisconsin filled the room. Several Wisconsin residents had arranged the gathering and had arrived to meet them: two U.S. professors with a small group of college students, joined by an owner of a dairy farm who employed migrant workers, and a woman with 10 years of experience running a non-profit organization connecting rural Wisconsinites to family members of migrant farm workers. After sharing a typical meal of soup, tortillas, beans and rice, the students from Wisconsin shyly offered a viewing of “The Other Side of the Fence,” a film they created to connect immigrant farm workers in Wisconsin with their home communities in Veracruz. Relatives and friends of the videotaped immigrants heard and saw their loved ones describe experiences of living and working far away from their
homes. The Wisconsin students were polite and attentive as the men sent greetings and talked about their experiences, including some poignant stories of hardship and racism.

As a central part of a class about Mexican immigration, our students from a small, liberal arts college in Wisconsin embarked on “bridging projects,” videos they produced about Mexican peoples’ lives and one specifically connecting immigrants in Wisconsin with their home communities across the border. Our hope for this work with students was to “foster a critical consciousness of self, others and the world and a commitment to address issues of social relevance” (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009, p. 782), especially as it concerns the relationship between Mexico and the United States, immigrants’ circumstances, and the students’ own social positions. Although we wanted to contribute something positive to the Mexican communities we visited, we were under no illusion that our efforts would result in substantial or long-term social change. Our intention was, at minimum, to do no harm.

The scenario described in the vignette took place after almost one year of preparation, hundreds of teaching hours, two exploratory trips to Mexico, an immense amount of mundane logistical work and creative coordination. Given a multitude of challenges, the fact that this group came together at all reflects fortuitous partnerships. In our critical reflection upon the experience through reading students’ journals and papers and our own participation, we valued the unique encounters, moments of deep learning, and precious gems of experience for undergraduate students. We felt that they came away with a much deeper appreciation for the lives of immigrant farm workers living and laboring in their state. However, as the ending of the narrative foretells, there remained some messy outcomes for this unique form of student engagement.

In this critical reflection on our work, we offer ideas on why the bridging project we developed with our Mexican partners managed to take place despite many obstacles. We feel that the project was especially beneficial for the students, as well as non-exploitative and useful to the communities we visited. In an ideal critical service-learning model, we would have attempted to develop more substantive relationships with the immigrants and their home communities that would have allowed for more authentic and sustained forms of communication. Still, the insights we now offer are only the result of having embarked on this type of project and experienced it in its full messiness.

**Critical Service-Learning: The Ideal**

International service work holds potential for transformative education for students and addresses an urgent need in universities to create more competent, globally aware individuals (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011). The dramatic rise in short-term international trips operated through universities since the early 1990s calls for a renewed focus on more defined intended outcomes and purpose (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Talwalker, 2012). However, the ethics of the exchanges that occur on these trips are becoming more salient.
While some proponents tout the necessity of international service work for transformative student learning and for its effectiveness in creating “global citizens” (Bringle & Hatch, 2011; Perry, 2012; Tarrant, 2010), others have approached international service-learning and other forms of aid and NGO work with a more critical lens (Eby 1998; Illich, 1968; Talwalker, 2012; Woolf, 2010). Forms of service in economically poor countries, especially when approached in creative and engaged ways and combined with critical reflection, can represent a valuable form of experiential learning for students that facilitates deep learning (Perry, Stoner & Tarrant, 2012).

Although the educational benefit to students should not be discounted, it needs to be balanced with close attention to the impact on the communities “served.” Ivan Illich (1968) famously critiqued the practice of sending “volunteer armies” of people from the United States and Europe to poor regions of Southeast Asia and Latin America. He contended that well-intentioned interventions by Westerners can unwittingly be seen by those served as patronizing and even harmful. Illich concluded that, because of the destructive U.S. policies, volunteers from the United States and other developed countries should desist from helping work in poor countries. Instead, he pleaded with those who would engage in such work to instead do so in their own countries, pay attention to their own poor and to the policies that their governments make that render life difficult in other places, such as Mexico.

An important critique of traditional service work is its tendency to be temporary and superficial. Short-term solutions to deeply entrenched social problems can insidiously serve to pacify people who have been victimized by destructive U.S. policies and interventions without addressing any structural changes (Illich, 1968). Short-term service-learning can also divert local efforts to solve problems, thus harming community members when, inevitably, relationships are fleeting (Eby, 1998).

Short-term service work that does not involve a critical study of social structural conditions can also be detrimental to student learning. Engaging in aid-like work with an abstract notion of global citizenship and without a careful analysis of the causes of poverty in the global south can lead to “impoverished understandings” of complex social relations (Talwalker, 2012). A volunteer experience in which privilege is not fully scrutinized can do nothing to counter the tendency in the global north to protect a place of privilege, comfort and security. Woolf (2010) argues that the well-intended goal of creating “global citizens” is futile since it is a concept only possible for a very small percentage of fortunate members of the planet who are free to cross borders. Although many of those who are recipients of service projects do travel across borders, they often do so involuntarily, due to economic and political migration pressures. He further claims that the notion of individual student “transformation” is unrealistic. At best, these exchanges should strive to give students the kinds of experiences that leave them more informed, with a clearer sense of morality and empowered with analytical tools that lead to even greater awareness.
Few of the aforementioned critics (with the exception of Illich) conclude that we should halt all international service work. For instance, if we want to engage in service work abroad, Talwalker (2012) contends, it is best to recognize ourselves as consumers of the “aid world” and do so with creativity and full awareness. Eby (1998) maintains that international service work should not be abandoned, but instead can build on strengths and compensate for limitations. He concludes that it is best that our service be grounded academically, understood sociologically, include continual reflection, and be arranged with individuals that have deep roots in the community. Finally, the purpose of these experiences should not only be aimed at student learning, but also address social change, agency policies, and community structure. Thus, critical service-learning, as distinct from traditional forms of non-critical volunteerism, is analyzed through a socially critical lens, aimed at social structural change that supports established grassroots community groups (Mitchell, 2008). What is more, the question of whose needs are being served by this exchange needs to be analyzed and made explicit (Eby, 1998).

Critical service-learning also takes seriously the voice of the community. The community engaged should not be viewed as the recipient of help, but instead as a mutual partner, preferably assuming an expert role (d’Arlach, Sanchez & Feuer, 2009). Otherwise, in the absence of full mutuality and reciprocity, good intentions to help people, particularly within immigrant communities, can recreate hierarchies and power imbalances that are ultimately harmful (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009). While it is not always possible to eliminate power imbalances, they can be made visible in order to make relationships as mutual as possible (Catlett & Poweller, 2011).

Within a critical service-learning model, the purpose of the endeavor should be aimed at social change. Service within this framework is meant to be, at its best revolutionary, and at a minimum about transforming systems (Mitchell, 2008). Ideally, it is aimed at the redistribution of power and the development of authentic relationships. In order to do this, agendas are developed together and power relations are made visible and transparent. For authentic relationships to develop, prolonged engagements (beyond one semester) are necessary, Mitchell contends. Students who naively arrive in a transitory fashion with too much optimism can be disruptive to local agencies’ or communities’ longer-term goals (Mills, 2012).

Another important component to critical service-learning is the interrogation of one’s own privilege and position within the larger social structure. Service-learning involves unpredictable relationships and incidents and can entail personal and intellectual risk-taking. There is inherent messiness in service-learning that should be anticipated (Clayton & Asch, 2004). It involves inevitable forms of tensions that can lead students to higher levels of personal adaptability (Mills, 2012). Disorienting and uncomfortable situations can lead students to change the framing of their inquiries, to question previously held beliefs, and be a catalyst for future ways of seeing and behaving in the world (McKeown, 2009). Critically-informed community engagement produces intense emotional moments for students, as well as destabilizing and disorienting dilemmas that make privilege more visible (King, 2004). The
discomfort, displacement and awkwardness that students can experience are important elements of the unpredictable, messiness of service-learning (Camacho, 2004; Dalton & Crosby, 2008; Langstraat & Bowdon, 2011). Discomforts around one’s own privilege can even be “existentially disturbing” (Catlett & Proweller, 2011).

In critical service-learning experiences, students do not get packaged information. Instead, they experience a messy process that, if done correctly, can lead to greater self-awareness (Catlett & Proweller, 2011). Experiencing discomfort is crucial, since it is a necessary part of an “emergent understanding of one’s social position” (Clayton & Asch, 2004). Points of discomfort offer critical learning opportunities, if paired carefully with reflection (Sharpe & Dear, 2013). If students are helped to intentionally embrace discomfort, and no longer allowed to be oblivious to others’ pain and one’s own privilege, they can experience a tremendous shift in the way they view their own positionality (Butin, 2010).

Our Experiences in Latin America

Our own positionality and experiences in Latin America compelled us to follow, as much as possible, a critical service-learning framework. Whitaker, a sociologist, lived in Veracruz, Mexico with her family for one year, where she taught at the University of Veracruz in the capital city of Xalapa and worked as a consultant to evaluate community projects for the Secretary of Education. Bathum, a nursing professor, spent 13 years working in primary health care with indigenous peoples of Guatemala and Peru.

Whitaker’s previous student trip to Mexico did not include service-learning. Without some sense of purpose and excuse to engage with people, she felt it was difficult for the students to make connections between the class material and what they witnessed in Mexico. On this earlier trip, which involved visits to communities with high levels of out-migration, Whitaker found that the U.S. students were interested in Mexico and empathetic toward people who felt pressure to emigrate; however, they seemed to be unable or unwilling to closely observe, analyze and truly “take in” what they were experiencing while in the country. To appreciate the complexities of the relationship between the United States and Mexico, students needed to remain alert and aware to what was around them. Although students were polite to the people they encountered, there was also a great deal of “tuning out” – particularly too much alcohol consumption and sleeping during the internal travel on the part of students. She felt that students’ escape behaviors likely resulted from the discomfort and awkwardness of the cultural and language barriers as well as the emotional difficulty of directly confronting others’ tragic separations. Whitaker reasoned that the lack of student engagement was also due to the trip structure as “educational tourism,” without grounding in a meaningful service-learning project.

Although we both felt that adding a service-learning component to the experience was important, we did not want to fall into the trap of creating a “feel good” experience that undermined authentic, informed learning. After the first trip, Whitaker felt that she did not prepare students well enough to accept and even welcome uncomfortable exchanges and
wanted to include more preparation for students so that they might embrace the inevitable awkward moments and come to accept them as a normal and valuable part of learning.

The second student trip (the subject of this paper) included the second author, Mary Elizabeth Bathum. She brought a particularly critical perspective of international service-learning. During her time in Latin America, she spent years receiving students from developed countries for “out of country transformative experiences.” In Peru and Guatemala she saw these “partnerships” as favoring the needs of the developed countries over the developing ones. Time and time again, the local partners used their resources to welcome, take care of, and accommodate visitors. She witnessed the importation of health care technologies beyond the local partners’ abilities to sustain them. The small Peruvian community where she worked for 10 years became an artifact graveyard of failed governmental and non-governmental projects: windmills that did not work, latrines used to store potatoes and grain, water pipes left rusted and disconnected, and community centers abandoned half-finished and unused.

Unequal, unsustainable service partnerships were troubling contingencies that the two of us consciously tried to avoid. We also wished to steer clear of the kind of voyeuristic “tourism of the marginalized” that can characterize educational travel to poor countries (Camacho, 2004). We held up as our model the kind of critical service-learning described earlier. Ideally, a service project involving Mexican immigrants would be conducted in full collaboration with the community through the development of authentic relationships and oriented toward social change (Mitchell, 2008; Klak & Mullaney, 2011). The reality, however, was not nearly so perfect. Our university schedules and structure, and the turnover and lack of experience of our students made truly mutual relationships and social change-oriented service, in this context, extremely difficult. However, in our estimation, the primary project for the class, while not the critical service-learning ideal, met several of the aforementioned criteria, served as an excellent and profound learning tool for students, and was of use to the immigrants and their home communities.

**Bridging Borders: The Class**

The ultimate objective of the Bridging Borders class was to move students toward sociological observation and analyses: beyond admiring scenery to becoming curious about the people who live in the houses and walk the streets (Berger, 1963). In general, people from the United States have little knowledge about the role Mexico plays as a primary economic trade partner (The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2013). Many hold negative and inaccurate views about undocumented immigrants (Lilley, 2012).

Though the students entered with some previous experience and knowledge about immigration and Latin America, almost all lacked background knowledge about Mexico and the complex causes of Mexican immigration to the United States. The 11 students in the Bridging Borders class were a group of traditional-age, female students, most in their junior or senior year. The majority were white, with the exception of one Mexican-American and one
Asian-American. As evidenced by a pretest Whitaker gave and an early paper written by the students in the first week, few were familiar with basic political, geographical and social facts related to Mexico or had much contact with Mexican people. Even for those empathetic toward the plight of immigrants, absent contact with the people affected one can be left vulnerable to adopting the narrow representation presented by the media, often tainted by racist and nationalistic bias.

The immigration debates and mainstream popular media in the United States present limiting, mostly negative images of Mexicans and Mexico. Historically, politicians and the media have helped to shape public discourse around immigration. Particularly after the late 1970s, some popular media outlets began presenting Mexican immigrants as criminals or “illegals” (Hing, 2004). More recently, accusations of criminality, job stealing, desert littering, and social service abuses have been pervasive, whether subtle or explicit. The border is often shown as a war zone (Chavez, 2001). In this context of fear, sensational media and the public commentary that frequently follows it, can depict Mexicans as harmful, invading “aliens.”

Conceptual bridges need to be built for people from the United States that allow for more authentic images of Mexicans and Mexico, starting with the recognition of entrenched structural inequalities that create the conditions for migration. Although the two nations are strongly connected economically and socially, there are important inequalities between the people of the United States and Mexico. The terms of trade stipulated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) greatly favor the economic interests of corporations and agricultural producers in the United States (Burstein, 2007). The average annual income gap between the two countries is substantial. In 2012, the median annual income in the U.S. was $50,000 in the U.S. and less than $10,000 in Mexico (World Bank, 2013). Undocumented immigration flows almost exclusively north. Finally, the fortification of the U.S./Mexican border is a further symbol of grave inequities between the two nations, since the militarization exists almost exclusively to limit entry to the U.S. side.

By structuring a unique model of travel with clear expectations and creative projects that connected U.S. and Mexican communities, we hoped to encourage students to stay present, to develop a critical eye for the limitations of consuming a place and a people through tourism, and to ultimately open themselves up for the potential of transformative learning. We wanted to help them move beyond the rhetoric of the immigration debates, past stereotypes of Mexicans as the “others” and away from the stance of a tourist in which experiences are narrowly confined to the consumption of goods, services and scenery (Urry, 2002). In order for this learning experience to act as a bridge between cultures and promote mutual understanding, students needed to develop a deeper appreciation for the social context of Mexicans’ lives.

The classroom component during the fall semester emphasized the interdependence between the United States and Mexico and structural inequalities that create the conditions for migration. The students learned about the history of migration from Mexico to the United
States, particularly the migratory impact of the Bracero Program (a diplomatic agreement between the two nations to promote temporary Mexican labor in U.S. agriculture between 1942 and 1967), the effects of NAFTA on farmers in both countries and the underground markets for drugs and weapons across the border. This type of traditional classroom learning, however, was kept to a minimum in favor of highly interactive engagement with bridging projects. The projects required personal contact with Mexicans who would tell their stories in their own words.

**The Primary Bridging Project: “The Other Side of the Fence”**

Three bridging projects were designed and implemented by students. The project that the majority of the students participated in was the production and presentation of a student-produced film, “The Other Side of the Fence,” based on interviews they conducted on Wisconsin dairy farms. The immigrants talked about their reasons for coming to the United States and their experiences in Wisconsin.

Nearly all of the immigrant dairy farm workers in the western part of Wisconsin originate from two small communities in the state of Veracruz. These remote communities are inhabited by poor indigenous people with low levels of formal education. The land is not sufficiently arable even for subsistence farming. Because the communities are out of the way of most metropolitan labor markets, men have historically migrated for short periods of time to the nearby state of Puebla and to Mexico City for jobs. Starting in the early 1990s, they also began immigrating to the United States for more lengthy work stints. A major migrant stream linked to western Wisconsin developed where men could secure mostly undocumented positions as farm hands on dairy farms.

We coordinated with the director of a Wisconsin NGO who provides Spanish/English interpretation on Wisconsin farms and operated an intercultural immersion program. The unique program, which she had operated for 10 years, was designed to teach local U.S. residents of rural Wisconsin communities about the indigenous communities in Mexico, where the dairy farm workers originated. Our community partner helped to arrange for our students’ visits to the Wisconsin farms, the interviews with farm workers and their employers and the showings in the home communities in Mexico. Because of her long-standing and deep connections to the farmers and the farm workers, as well as their family members in Mexico, she was an invaluable asset to our primary bridging project.

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1 More than one-half of the class worked on the production of the “Other Side of the Fence.” The other two groups worked on other bridging projects. Two students worked on a cross-cultural blog with Mexican university students about topics of mutual interest, such as education and violence, including video interviews that they virtually shared with one another, and with both sets of classes in Wisconsin and Veracruz. The other group of three students produced a short film featuring interviews they conducted with Mexican immigrants living in Madison, Wisconsin.
Although much of the credit can be given to the students -- especially those who entered the class with a great deal of maturity, concern for social justice and interest in the topics -- the structure of the class also facilitated successful group exchanges. As part of the class assignment, students were required to give short, informal presentations to one another during class-time about the progress of their projects. As a result, they became accustomed to sharing their ideas about what they saw as interesting, surprising, and of significance to them in the development of their projects. Being thoughtful about one’s own developing views, as well as giving and receiving constructive peer critiques and comments became the norm in the classroom. The experiences students had in the classroom developing their projects helped to build a sense of community that fostered this kind of openness and comfort with a variety of points of view.

During class we discussed the meaning and the context of what students learned in their interviews. Later, they were challenged to explain to campus audiences the significance of the themes they uncovered in the men’s narratives. In so doing, they truly took on the roles of experts and advocates. Even the students who were somewhat apathetic or dogmatic in their negative views about undocumented immigration at the beginning of the semester, turned a corner after visiting the farms, talking with the men and spending hours of time editing the films and discussing the meaning of the interviews. This was all practice for the actual showing of the film for the primary audience: the families and friends of the migrants in their small home villages in Veracruz, Mexico.

We anticipated that the conversations with the family and friends of the men the students had interviewed might be uncomfortable. Only two of the 11 students spoke Spanish well enough to communicate directly with them. In preparation for the exchange, we spent time in class practicing imagined conversations we might have with family members in Mexico. We were aided by several interpreters (one student from the class, the second author, and the daughter of the first author, who would accompany us as an assistant). By the end of this exercise, the students were quite cognizant of the potential for awkward exchanges. We discussed their feelings about this and prepared them to consider those moments as necessary parts of deep learning, upon which they would be expected to journal during the trip. There was little more that could have prepared them for how difficult it would be to communicate with indigenous people from isolated communities in Mexico, whose lived reality included extreme poverty and family separation.

**Bridging Borders in Mexico**

Some advance preparation was necessary for our showing of the film in Veracruz in the indigenous home communities. Whitaker visited the communities to arrange for the film showings two months prior to the students’ trip. With the help of our Wisconsin community partner who had ties to the community in Mexico, we were able to locate interested families and friends. She helped us arrange to have two meals with members of the two communities in Veracruz and to show the film.
Both Mexican communities we visited were in the municipality of Zongolica consisting of about 40,000 people scattered throughout several small, indigenous villages. In these communities, about 80% of the population speaks Spanish and the language of Náhuatl which originates from descendants of the Aztec and Totonac indigenous groups.

We showed the film twice: once to a small group of immediate family members at the home of a young man who had just returned from his stint working on a dairy farm in Wisconsin and again to a larger gathering of about 30 people in a neighboring community. On both days, those connected to the videotaped immigrants watched and listened as their loved ones described experiences of living and working far away from their homes. They were very quiet as the men in the movie sent greetings and talked about their lives in Wisconsin, including some poignant stories of hardship and racism. Because of language and cultural barriers, combined with the brevity of our visits in Mexico, there was little conversation between students and community members beyond a cursory discussion of their reaction to the film.

On the second day, students sat at long tables interspersed among the community members. We were not able to stay long. The bus we had chartered to pick us up was there shortly after the showing, in time for the 90 minute trek back to the small city where we were staying, before it became too dark to travel. The students would tell us later in our lengthy reflection that evening at the hotel that they felt awkward and unable to communicate – even through an interpreter.

There were some clear indications that the project, although not the ideal critical service-learning project, had some important benefits. Although the social conditions were not ideal for having authentic and meaningful forms of sharing with the community members, we took solace in the fact that several members of the audience cheered and applauded as family members appeared on the screen. Moreover, after we departed from the second community, the 30 or so community members stayed to view the movie again. What is more, our Wisconsin community partner with a clear connection to the community, stayed to collect cards, pictures and stories to share with the men back in Wisconsin upon her return. For us, the journal entries and critical reflections the students wrote later were some of the most reflective of genuine introspection. Students were more deeply aware of the privileges they held by accident of birth in a class position and citizenship status that allowed them to live and work within their own nation and travel freely almost anywhere in the world.

Critical Reflection: Creating Humus

Our project was not the ideal critical service-learning experience because it lacked community reciprocity and close personal connection across borders. However, we feel confident that we did not cause harm – and most likely offered something of value. Originally we questioned whether it was even possible to create anything that did not cause harm to Mexican communities in some form. We wanted to create a responsible service-learning experience for students, meaningful and useful to us, our students, and Mexican immigrant communities on
both sides of the border. At the same time, we were contending with the severity of the social problems, the entrenched political and social conflicts that can undermine safe travel, the unpredictability of students’ maturity and ease in adaptation to a new culture, and the balance of time involvement in developing and maintaining international partnerships with teaching and small college responsibilities. These challenges were made worse by the paucity of local, grassroots organizations available to help us plug into a truly critical service-learning experience.

We worked with what we had available to us: a serendipitous connection between communities that Whitaker was familiar with, due to her time living in Veracruz and her connections in that state; and, a helpful director of a small NGO based in Wisconsin that had a mission consistent with our learning objectives and connections to farm workers and their home communities. The Mexican participants did not ask us to produce the video, nor did they direct its content, by helping derive the questions or by making decisions about editing. In this way, the project was not fully mutual. But the Mexican people, while not full partners in our project, were participants who willingly told their stories (on the U.S. side) and gladly listened (on the Mexican side).

The other limitation of our engagement with these communities was the fact that our work did not seek to address structural problems that might lead to social change. The problems faced by Mexican migrant dairy farm workers in Wisconsin are fairly intractable; they stem from profound structural inequalities. The classroom content of the course covered these structural issues, but the service-learning was not designed to directly redress them. We judged that, given their lack of experience and relative naivety upon entering the class, our students were not at a stage in their learning or awareness to embark in controversial political work. What they did gain was the background knowledge and interpersonal skills that may empower them to feel competent in social change work in the future. Like other carefully designed critical service-learning projects, the social situations and conversations they experienced through this project, helped them to "hone their skills of communicating respectfully across difference" (Shackford-Bradley, 2013, p. 152).

This described course and service-learning experience did not fit neatly into either the "volunteer tourism" or the "critical service-learning" models. It may not even be rightly called "service." However, we felt that our Bridging Borders course offered a type of social encounter that helped students to be more deeply aware of others' lived experiences in a way that challenged their own position of privilege. Moreover, we feel that it provided a momentary benefit for Mexican communities without claims to being “American saviors” or even traditional helpers or volunteers.

We developed the bridging projects with the goals of deep student learning and respect for the men and their communities in mind. All of the projects relied upon the creative energy of the students and gave them the opportunity to have recorded conversations with Mexican immigrants, reflect upon them together, find meaning in their responses to questions, and
make decisions about how to tell their stories. We consciously tried to create community among the students in order to foster an atmosphere where critical questions could be asked.

The benefits for student learning were profound. The production and showing of the “Other Side of the Fence” grounded the class discussions, helped create a learning community among students and faculty and allowed students to engage with the issues that seemed important to the immigrant farm workers. Although the experiences that the students had were pivotal to their learning, we wanted to ensure that the work they were doing was not only for their benefit, but could be useful and meaningful for the Mexicans with whom we worked.

In an ideal critical service-learning model, we would have attempted to develop more substantive relationships with the immigrants and their home communities to allow for more authentic forms of communication. This was a limitation of the project that we fully acknowledge. No one understood this better than the students who took part in this exchange. The encounters we had in rural Veracruz with family members and friends of immigrants, while touching and hopefully meaningful, did not result in long-lasting, deep relationships across the border. However, they gave the farm workers an opportunity to tell their stories to an empathetic group of young people and provided a momentary link with their home communities in Mexico. Unfortunately, the students did not maintain contact with the farm workers that they interviewed in Wisconsin. This was due to the brevity of their visits to the farms and the geographical distance that separated them. Because of the men’s social isolation, more substantial relationships with the students or the implementation of further projects to promote more regular connections with their communities would have benefited them. Our lack of continued contact with the migrant farm workers of their home communities left us feeling as though our work was less than the mutual/reciprocal critical service ideal. We also recognize that it is part of the messiness of doing this type of work, where our professional work demands make sustaining those ties difficult – as well as the limitations of class, ethnicity, nationality, language, and citizenship status -- which render communication and relationships difficult.

Despite a lack of reciprocity, we left something of value to the migrants and their families. What we and the students contributed was genuine interest in the men’s stories of living as migrants in our state and about their lives in Mexico, and a vehicle for telling their stories and expressing their feelings for a Wisconsin audience and their communities in Mexico. We made dozens of copies of the film so that all of the men and members of their home communities could keep them. Although it is likely that virtually none of the family and friends had the technology in their own homes to view the film on their own, we know that in both communities there were options for doing so in the two locations where we originally viewed the film. At the very least, the community gatherings that we coordinated allowed people to come together around their shared experiences of migration and family separation, share a meal with neighbors and students, and, at least momentarily, to connect, if only via filmed interviews, with their loved ones in Wisconsin.
We began our bridging projects with a strong intention to at least do no harm. We wondered if the showing of the video with little time to process with the family and community may have caused some distress. For this, we relied on the advice from our community partner in Wisconsin, who had a long-standing connection to the farmers, and immigrant farm workers, as well as their family members in Mexico. Although she wished that the students could have maintained some type of longer term contact with the young men working on the dairy farms, her general assessment seemed to be that the project was beneficial to the Mexican families. She told us she was happy to have been a part of the experience and expressed to us at the end of our visit that she wished to repeat it again with subsequent classes. In the end, we assessed that the experience was a space for these migratory people to share their common concerns and provide support for one another.

A valuable critique of international service-learning is that it may cause more harm than good to the people of the developing countries where we place students. The inherent economic and power differences between U.S. students and migratory communities have the potential to create much misunderstanding and misinterpretations of intent. We question, however, whether a brief visit of young inexperienced students to a Mexican indigenous community has much potential for harm. Communities that have historically dealt with the Spanish conquest of their lands and a destructive civil war, and that now contend with harsh economic conditions brought on by neo-liberalism, drug trade violence and family separations, have honed strong survival skills beyond what disruption a brief student visit could create. Ironically, we recognize that the fear of “causing harm” may be another way we do not recognize and value the power and strength of indigenous communities.

The primary benefit of this exchange was to the students who took part in it. The kind of project our students embarked upon certainly was of the messy, uncomfortable type that left them with a deeper sense of their unearned privilege. Visiting the Wisconsin farms where the migrants worked, hearing their stories, and delivering the video to the extremely marginalized communities from which they originated included some disorienting and uncomfortable moments. It was also deeply enriching. The students experienced an ideal scenario by which to examine their own privilege, as messengers of sometimes difficult stories: ones that could not easily be told in-person due to the migrants and the Mexican communities’ lack of resources and travel restrictions.

We learned something by experimenting with pedagogy that helped students tune in to what was around them, to pay close attention to the experiences of others, and to be more aware of their own position and privileges. One concern Whitaker had from her previous experience with students in Mexico was students’ tendencies to try to escape uncomfortable exchanges and situations. In addition to these projects, which put students in the position of telling others’ stories, we experimented with practical pedagogical strategies during this course and trip. We found that evaluating students (grading) on their flexibility and openness to new experiences improved their willingness to pay attention to people’s stories and living conditions. To further allow for this, we offered an early morning meditation and yoga time to
help students decrease stress and encouraged them to work on being mindful during the trip. We instituted a no alcohol policy during the trip, and although we were not able to enforce this, we made clear to students that the trip was designed for learning, and that staying aware and alert would enhance that.

The video “The Other Side of the Fence” has lived on and been shown multiple times in the Madison area, including classroom settings, led by students in the class. Students could see that their work and connection with immigrants had value outside of the trip. They grew in their understanding of accountability and how media of this type can help with further education in their own communities.

We honestly cannot assess whether our students developed a critical social consciousness or will become more aware of the complexities of global relationships and their own position within it. We have come to liken our experiences to creating humus. Humus is the dark organic material in the soil that is produced by the decomposition and decay of organic material. It may be essential for the fertility of the soil and for plant growth. We have recognized that our work in bridging borders with U.S. college students, communities in Mexico, and Mexican immigrants may be compared with the process of creating humus; a messy, undefined organic process, full of questions, mistakes, uncertainties and an inability to control for outcomes. Palmer (2000), an internationally known teacher, writer and activist, uses the metaphor of humus, the “decayed vegetable matter that feeds the roots of plants.” He states:

I love the fact that the word humus ...comes from the same root that gives rise to the word humility. It is a blessed etymology. It helps me understand that the humiliating events of life, the events that leave “mud on my face” or that “make my name mud,” may create the fertile soil in which something new can grow (p. 37).

We have witnessed that reflective international community engagement provides our students and ourselves as educators a powerful instrument for learning. We stay in this messy and humiliating process hoping in the potential of that new growth to create understanding between peoples and compassion for our shared human experiences.

**Conclusion**

Our students attempted to “bridge borders” through a film they produced that linked indigenous communities in Mexico to their family members employed as dairy farm workers in Wisconsin. Employing a critical social consciousness approach to community engagement, we sought to foster deep, authentic student learning about Mexican migrants’ lives and the students’ own social positions, while also contributing something positive, however small, to Mexican communities. The primary beneficiaries of this experience were the students and the people they influence in their lives. Students developed deeper appreciations for all of this messiness. The project allowed us to embed their learning in purposeful projects. As educators, these experiences made us deeply aware of the ambiguities, paradoxes and elusiveness of...
transformative international education and social change work. However, it also convinced us of its vital importance; to promote experiences for students from the United States that foster authentic learning and meaningful relationships across borders, however messy or imperfect they may be.
References


