



# The Definition of Community: A Student Perspective

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## Abstract

When designing service-learning programs, catch-words like 'community engagement' and 'community partners' come to mind. In classrooms, in books, in the very structure of research grants, undergraduates are taught to work through and with 'the community' and to have 'community centered' project design. Experts, professors, and detailed studies of development initiatives teach us that top-down approaches will never work and communities must be engaged as 'equal partners.' This rhetoric of 'community-engagement' actually gives rise to a homogenizing and simplifying view of 'community' and glosses over the complex and multi-faceted nature of the concept of 'community.' These assumptions can endanger the success of service-learning projects. In June 2010, we traveled to Belize on a research grant with the goal of installing slow-sand water filters in a rural community. Our perceptions of 'community' profoundly shaped the way we designed and implemented our project, and we quickly found that our initial conception of the 'community' was incorrect. We saw that there is a large difference between how the 'community' is treated in service-learning discourse and actual on-the-ground realities. This paper offers a unique student perspective on the definition of 'community.' We hope that other students will learn from our experiences and that educators will be able to more critically examine how the concept of 'community' is presented to students.

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2010, a team of four American undergraduate students from the University of Virginia (U.Va.) traveled to La Gracia, Belize to conduct a water-filtration project. Building on past student trips (see Magoon et al, 2010) to the small rural town, we installed slow-sand

point-of-use water filtration units in five different households and carried out training courses for the recipient families. Distribution of the five filters in a 36-family village was an important consideration, so we worked with a village organization called the Water Board to ensure equitable allocation of the filters. The Water Board, which managed the local water

distribution system, was our principle on-the-ground community partner and we relied heavily upon them in this capacity. By working through the Water Board, we felt that we were truly acting in the best interest of the community by allowing the community itself to distribute the filters. The project was a success, resulting in the implementation of the five filter units and a thorough training program based on the strong personal relationships that we had formed with the recipient families, both during the 2010 trip and past U.Va. projects to the village.

However, upon realizing that four of the five recipients were Water Board families, we were forced to reexamine our project. Quickly, the notion of the Water Board as a representative community organization broke down: they typically had the largest families, were some of the wealthier members of the village, and mostly lived close the central public village space. Many families were not represented by the Water Board, nor were connected to the board in any way. Communication between the Water Board and the other families was limited and confused, as we saw in our meetings. The Water Board was hardly the representative community partner that we had thought. One confused and slightly exasperated villager asked us directly: "Why did you go through them? Why did you work with the Water Board?"

Why did we? Quite simply, it was how we were taught. Specific classwork and academic curricula taught us to identify and engage community structures to ensure that local needs and concerns were given a space to be voiced. Guest speakers, professors, field experts, and more experienced students drilled in us the futility of top-down approaches to international development and the need for equitable partnerships with local agents. We were given many tragic examples of ill-conceived development initiatives, such as the infamous "play pump" project in Africa, in which a failure to listen to the needs of the communities led to a development disaster (see "Southern Africa: Troubled Waters," 2010). We were warned against playing the part of a stereotypically ignorant Western development worker; oblivious to local problems, bypassing community concerns, and often doing more harm than good. The way to avoid these problems, we were taught, was a 'community-based' approach that allowed us as outsiders to engage the community as an equal partner to pursue the common good. This

### June 2010 Project Summary

*Week 1:* Arrive, establish contact with Water Board

*Week 2:* Discuss filter distribution with Water Board, conduct water quality tests

*Week 3:* Conduct training program for recipient families

*Week 4:* Install filters, continue training program

model was simple, identify a local partner, 'engage' them, and work with them to achieve a desirable result.

Our team tried to do just that. We sought to engage the community of La Gracia through the Water Board, to listen to their needs, and to respond to the problems they identified; yet this strategy did not have the desired effect. Far from ensuring an equitable and effective solution to the village's problems, somehow our project exacerbated existing social divides. Our attempts to 'engage' the 'community' resulted in us only 'engaging' a small, powerful, and unrepresentative sector of the village. Though we followed the model of 'community-engagement' that we had been taught, somehow this model failed to deliver the promised results.

Why? At the core of the 'community-engagement' model is the conception of the 'community' as a simple, homogenous unit that could be represented by a single organization and thus 'engaged' effectively. Our experience in La Gracia reveals this idea of 'community' is false. We found that 'community' is not a monolithic entity that can simply be 'engaged' from the outside. Communities are complex, changing, and multi-faceted; a view was absent in the rhetoric that we were taught. Our experience offers important challenges to a model of 'community-engagement' and raises some tough questions. What really constitutes a 'community'? And how does one 'engage' it?

### **'Community' in thought and practice**

Nearly thirty years ago, Robert Chambers published a sharp critique of rural development practices. Part of the problem he described was one of a structural underrepresentation of the poor in the development process: "Poor people are rarely met; when they are met, they often do not speak; when they do speak, they are often cautious and deferential; and what they say is often either not listened to, or brushed aside, or interpreted in a bad light" (1983). Recent community engagement paradigms of service-learning and a "scholarship of engagement" described by Butin (2010) have taken large steps to combat this problem. Community engagement is a strategy that focuses on the community itself and places community at the forefront of any program goals. This mode of thought forces students and researchers to work *with* and not *on* the community; communities become active participants in the project, instead of passive recipients. In our service-learning classes in U.Va., we were taught this strategy as the best way to achieve sustainable results in poor communities.

But what is the 'community?' This question is often not directly addressed in service-learning programs. Most definitions are simplistic ones that focus on the community as a shared locality with homogenous interests (Jones & Wells, 2007). Not surprisingly, this cohesive and homogenous idea of 'community' is preferred by service-learning programs or development organizations. Understandably, international aid groups are more likely to commit resources to an area that is perceived as unified and directed. It is much more efficient, much simpler,

and more effective (Goldstein, 2004). In this discourse, 'community' is almost conceived of as an object that a student researcher can plug into, interact with, or 'engage.' The language of 'community engagement' is itself problematic. 'Engagement' is "a term that is at once suggestive of a military 'battle' as much as the 'promise to marry'" as Tapela et al points out (Tapela, Makuleke, & Mavhunga, 2007). At the core of the dominant service-learning discourse of 'community engagement' is a homogenous view of what 'community' actually is.

Take, for example, the Jefferson Public Citizen (JPC) program at U.Va., a popular and growing organization that provides funding to undergraduate community-based research projects. In the 2010 handbook for students, the word 'community' is mentioned no less than 173 times, instructing students to seek out and work with 'community partnerships:' "Students and community members engage in scholarly inquiries into issues of local, national and international importance for a particular agency or a community" (*Jefferson Public Citizen Program: Student Handbook 2010-2011*). Though the handbook relies extensively on the word 'community,' it *never defines what this word actually means*. The implied definition, then, is what a community "should be: stable, concrete and unified collectives" with which students can engage and interact (Mavhunga & Dressler, 2010). Eager as it is to engage local communities, the discourse clearly makes certain assumptions about what 'community' means.

As for our team, the way we conceived of 'community' followed much along these lines. Much of our information came from past student trips to the village. U.Va. students have been traveling to la Gracia for several years on week-long service trips. In addition, in 2009, a small group of students worked in the village for over a month to install a large water filter at the village school. Magoon et al. (2010) describes the process and philosophy behind their project in an article for the *International Journal of Service Learning in Engineering*. Based upon these experiences as well as relevant class work on community projects, we formulated what we believed to be a comprehensive and accurate view of the La Gracia 'community.' Whether consciously or unconsciously, we imagined La Gracia to be a unified locality and full of residents banded together by similar interests and a geographic identity. In classes that discuss service-learning projects, we were taught to 'engage' this



The La Gracia school, a main public village space. All Water Board meetings took place here.

'community' in ways that put their needs and desires at the forefront of the project. Drawing on the example of the 2009 project as well as the "collaborative partnership" model outlined in the *Jefferson Public Citizen Program: Student Handbook 2010-2011*, we attempted to do just that. All the training, education, and resources at our command seemed to indicate that by

'engaging' the Water Board as our 'community partner,' we could arrive at equitable and sustainable implementation of the water filters.

What we found was quite different. The 'community' was far from a unified, monolithic entity that we had presumed; there were large levels of income disparity even in the 36-family village. Some families owned multiple cars, large rain tanks, and large plots of land (many of these families were on the Water Board). Most of the wealthiest and most visible members of the community lived in close proximity to the main road or the school, an important public space. We ourselves were perpetrators of what Chambers has called the "spatial bias" in development (Chambers, 1983); a favoring of those close to roads or well-traveled thoroughfares. In addition, the community was far from tethered to the locality. Founded in 1990 as part of a United Nations refugee resettlement initiative, La Gracia residents claimed a mix of Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Belizean identities. Some residents had traveled and even lived in the United States for a number of years, and there were widely mixed levels of English proficiency. Further fracturing the community were dynamics between the two churches. The existence of two churches in a seemingly small community surprised us and the relationship between the two was unclear. Some residents claimed membership at one church, others claimed membership at another. Sometimes members of the same family attended different churches. In fact, we were never sure of the nature of the interaction between the two congregations.

All of these revelations led us to the jarring realization that the 'community' was much more complicated than we had thought. The idyllic, homogenous farming village simply did not exist. The rhetoric of 'engaging' a unified entity called the 'community' did not translate to on-the-ground realities. Due to the complexities of inter-community relations, efforts to 'engage' the wider population of the village under the auspices of the Water Board were met with limited success. We found that the Water Board was not the representative community organization we had conceived it to be, if such a group even existed at all. Did we really 'engage' the 'community?' This question is of course rooted in one's definition of 'community,' a term that we liberally applied to La Gracia without realizing its full implications.

It is of course no surprise nor is it necessarily alarming that our project experience did not match up with our classroom experience; such is the nature of experiential education. What *is* alarming is that we followed the service-learning rhetoric of 'community-engagement' to the letter; we drew upon past relationships with the community, we engaged a local partner, and we acted through a local organization. It appeared that we had 'engaged' the 'community' in the way that we had been taught; listening first to the needs of the community, including them in the processes of the project, and relying on them for information and help. By all accounts, we had successfully carried out Butin's "scholarship of engagement." Yet, our simplistic conceptions of 'community' put us on a collision course with the more complicated reality and led to less than desirable outcomes for La Gracia. In our project, the promises of 'community engagement' were not realized. We believe that this represents a flaw in the structure of

'community engagement,' and particularly in the way these models define 'community' as homogenous.

What is especially jarring is that our experience is by no means unique; every year, U.Va. sends many teams of students to other countries or regions to do similar projects. And again, U.Va. is one among many schools that uses the discourse of 'community engagement' to frame the actions of its students. Like ours, these other projects may completely fulfill their aims as defined by conventional service-learning wisdom, yet this may mask problems with the very structure in which we conceptualize 'community' and 'engagement.' Given the true complex nature of 'community,' is this 'engagement' possible?

### What to do?

Engaging community is possible, though not in the idealized manner that most service-learning programs present. In order to work for positive change in communities at home and abroad, students must make a few important adjustments to the way that service-learning projects are framed. First and foremost, a critical look at the concept of 'community' in service-learning rhetoric is needed. Communities are not always the unified homogenous entities that service-learning and development rhetoric assumes or hopes for, as we saw in La Gracia. We encountered competing interests, large cultural variability, different attitudes towards outsiders, and unequal standards of living. Students and researchers should strive to rid themselves of assumptions about the homogeneity of 'communities.'

Upon closer inspection, the flaw in a uniform and all-encompassing definition of 'community' in service learning is obvious. The same term 'community' is applied to after-school tutoring programs in New York, to water-filtration projects in La Gracia, Belize, and to urban health programs in Africa. Is presenting to the Parents Teacher Association of an American inner-city school the same as presenting to the Water Board of La Gracia? In reality, community is a cultural idea that is peculiar to the region and cultural fabric that it is located in, and its ubiquitous use masks the peculiarities of on-the-ground realities. Large amounts of anthropological and ethnographic research has shown that ideas like 'citizenship,' 'family,' or even 'time' are not completely translatable across cultures (da Matta, 1987; Lazar, 2008; Whorf, 2001) 'Community' is no different. Too often we impose our own deep-seated assumptions upon the 'communities' we work in, which only serves to "blend complex factors into idealized themes" (Mavhunga & Dressler, 2010).

Schools that are committed to service-learning can combat this tendency by integrating some of the critiques in this paper into the curriculum of service-learning based classes. Butin (2010) has written at length about the challenges of institutionalizing service-learning in a sustainable way. Attention must also be paid to the *type* of service-learning that we are pursuing: is it a discourse that glosses over differences within a community or does it encourage ignorance of on-the-ground realities? Our team is guilty of this, and our experience certainly reflects that of

other students. Too often, we over simplify the environment with a simple exhortation to 'engage the community.'

Another important step to be taken is to simply slow down the service-learning process and spend more time assessing the needs and nature of the community around you. Brown-Glazner, Gutierrez, and Heil (2010) offer a unique student perspective on community engagement procedure, discovering that mutual and reciprocal dialogue is more important than checking off the boxes of pre-determined goals. If students are forced by time constraints to move quickly within a community, they must necessarily make assumptions about the nature of the communities they are working with. By slowing down projects and taking more time simply to engage in dialogue with community members, student researchers can modify their conceptions of community as new realities emerge. If student teams take the time to immerse themselves in the dynamics of the particular locale, it will be possible to break down simplified notions of what we think a community *should* be and be able to see it for what it *is*.

### Conclusion

New service-learning and community engagement scholarship has made a great effort to avoid the dangers laid out by Chambers in 1983. As other students have observed, it is "vital to make a place at the table for community members" in community-based research projects (Brown-Glazner et al., 2010). While this is absolutely true, even further examination of the structure of service-learning and the "scholarship of engagement" is needed. As Tapela et al. has observed, the "new architecture" of participatory research models often masks lingering problems (2007). The catch-phrase 'community engagement' and our very definition of 'community' needs assessment, as our team's experience shows. We must break down the ideas that 'communities' are homogenous, unified entities that can be easily 'engaged.' We must understand that our idea of 'community' may not translate to on-the-ground realities in the places we work in. Most importantly, we must be open to the environments around us, and be able to modify and evolve our models of service-learning as new problems are discovered.

As for our project, we hope to return to La Gracia with more filters, and with our new understanding of 'community.' Data gathering and relationship-building are critical, and we will be returning in coming months to gauge both the responses of the recipient and non-recipient families to craft a better project for the future. Understanding the complex dynamics of a community is crucial to working effectively within it, and by spending more time with residents in open and honest relationships we can learn more about the true nature of the 'community' of La Gracia. Only then can we hope to effect positive change for its residents.

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- ✓ Ariel Sayre (U.Va. SEAS 2012) studies Civil and Environmental Engineering. She is interested in sources of water contamination, both human and environmental. Her area of study focuses on how to prevent this pollution and systems to remove it, such as point-of-use water filtration.
- ✓ Rachel Schmidt (U.Va. SEAS 2012) studies Civil and Environmental Engineering. She is interested in water filtration and management, specifically in developing countries. She hopes to continue studying water and environmental concerns with relation to public policy infrastructure.
- ✓ Robert Swap, Ph. D. teaches in the Environmental Sciences department and the Global Development Studies program at U.Va. His research focuses on the relationship between human and environmental factors in the developing world.

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